

The Thin Line



Arja Salafranca

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The Thin Line

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Arja Salafranca



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The thin line

Two women sat at a table in a restaurant drinking herbal tea. Behind one of the women a man smoked, making the atmosphere cloudy. The other woman stirred lemon wedges and brown sugar into her cup – acid and sweetness mingling soothingly on her tongue.

Egg smells lingered.

They sat and talked about life and work, wanting to be free of the grind of everyday existence and how they wished they could stop working – be free to paint, dance, write, be creative.

It wasn't an option for them.

A group of businessmen came to occupy a table near the window. The men were loud, laughing raucously. The women strained to talk above the noise, voices hurting. The tea was getting cold.

The woman who was not involved asked the other how everything was going with her boyfriend. Fine, wonderful, the other replied. There

was nothing wrong there. The woman without a boyfriend paused, she looked her friend in the eye, drank a last sip of tea and said: 'People have market value, and I think you can do a lot better.'

The other woman shot back: 'Why?'

The friend, realising that she should not have said anything, replied, 'Forget it. I'm sorry. I don't know what goes on in your relationship. He's good for you in a lot of ways, understands your need to paint, be alone. Forget what I said. Sorry. It's erased.'

'Okay,' the other woman said.

They looked at each other, searching each other's faces. Something had opened up between them, something had stretched wide, wider than it should have, and then it had closed, too suddenly, too abruptly.

* * *

One year, some time ago, a man and a woman took a holiday on Lake Malawi. They rented a chalet on the shores of the lake. She was a stockbroker. He was a photographer. They had broken up a few months before going on this holiday and then had come together again after bumping into each other at a shopping mall.

Now they walked along the shores of the lake. The water lapped gently. It was humid. The woman sweated, her hair scrunched into a ponytail. The man walked ahead of her. She came up behind him, kicking up the sand with her effort. She could hardly breathe in this close air. She gasped slightly as she walked behind him.

They had come out after lunch for a bit of exercise. There was tension between them.

They had not fought. They had simply walked along the shores of the lake, sweaty, impatient and tired. The woman was angry. This holiday was not going to restore their hastily repaired relationship. This was clear now, with ten days still to go before the end of the

holiday, only a few behind them. She sat down on the sand and squinted into the white distance. He walked ahead, sauntering, not looking back at her. She watched him, admiring his broad back, his legs tanned by the tropical sun. He did look back eventually, eyes hidden behind sunglasses. She could not see the expression behind the shades. He seemed to pause, look at her, then stared into the distance. She watched him as he paused, as though he were sniffing the air, assessing something.

The woman was distracted by a little boy who was trying to sell her something. She took off her dark glasses.

‘Ten dollar!’ the boy beamed, thrusting a wooden statue at her. On a base of dark wood, the boy, or somebody else, had carved a slim-hipped fisherman, spear raised in one hand. The woman smiled wanly. ‘I don’t have any money on me now, and I don’t have any dollars.’

‘Five dollar!’ the boy smiled demanding.

‘I don’t have any money. I told you. No money.’

The boy smiled at her, held her eyes. Water lapped at her feet. She was hot and sticky. She tried to take a few deep breaths in this coiled thick air. She wiped sweat off her forehead with the raw back of her hand. The boy carried on looking at her.

The man paused again when the girlfriend had become a speck in the distance. He’d walked a long way away from the chalet. He sat on an upturned fishing boat and watched the fishermen hauling in their loads. The sky was dark and the lake was churning, there was a storm coming up and white foam capped the waves. The fishermen smiled at him. The man’s camera dangled around his neck. He felt calm. He went toward the fringes of the lake and watched the surface churning up. He looked forward to the rain.

He felt something for the woman he’d left behind sitting on the shores of the lake, staring after him. But he didn’t know what. Not concern, not irritation, he felt too detached to be angry or irritated.

Regret, yes, regret, that was it, and perhaps sadness. Sadness for her, that she had come all this way, hoping to restore their relationship and it was all too clear that they could not go back, they could not go forward.

Later, he sat in the bar, fans whirring the hot air around the room, and drank beer and thought about the pictures he wanted to shoot on this trip.

* * *

It happens at the oddest times; and when you least expect it. It happens when someone says something that is not meant to wound or estrange, but it still does. It could be a dark candlelit restaurant, and a couple are testing the waters, trying to see if they can still be together. And they are sitting in this restaurant, which probably holds memories for them and they can see the desired reconciliation will not take place. Past hurts bristle around the table and the man says he doesn't know what he wants, and the woman says, 'I never enjoyed sex with you, you know.' The man's eyes cloud over. He doesn't know it, and neither does she, but now it is definitely over. His eyes will cloud over further, and then his heart will snap shut. What she has just said will never be erased. It can only be remembered, filed away, used as ammunition.

Except he will no longer need to keep it as ammunition. His snapped heart will harden, although he will only realise this after a few weeks. And he will stop caring and start to realise that her feet are ugly and there are lines around her mouth, and she slouches.

* * *

It finally struck one morning over breakfast, over scrambled eggs, toast burning and juice spilling.

‘Can’t you help!’ she yelled as the smell of burnt toast filled the kitchen.

‘Yes,’ he said calmly, ‘I can help.’

He took the toast out from under the grill, spreading thick globs of butter on the blackened surfaces, transferring the crumbs into the butter dish.

‘You’re getting crumbs in the butter dish,’ she said.

‘Yes, darling, I am. I’m helping you to make breakfast, dear.’

The dears and darlings hung in the air, bouncing off the woman’s startled expression.

‘I can’t eat that ...’ she started. She looked at the toast, the cold, bunched-up eggs in the pan, the dishes in the sink, the sun glinting off the water outside.

‘I’m going out,’ he said. ‘I’m going to eat breakfast at the hotel.’

‘You can’t do that ...’ the woman protested, watching as the man pocketed his wallet, put on sandals and sunglasses and left.

* * *

But words grow up and reverberate, and no matter how hard you try to erase them, they come back. They repeat like indigestion. You hide them behind justifications and excuses; but still they repeat, exerting influence.

The words looked back at this other woman and her boyfriend as they hugged, watching each other in the bathroom mirror. He smiled, eyes jovial, sparkly and unaware. She smiled, lines deepening at the corners of her mouth. She had started to notice things: faults in him that she had been able to ignore before. Other things started to grate on her, irritations she had once accepted as being part of living with another person. She tried not to say anything, but gradually she began to criticise him and snap at him over minor details. He was

good-natured, he laughed off her bad moods and understood her need to paint. She tried to remember how much she loved him, and sometimes she'd find her love again. Sometimes, and more often, it receded in the tide of irritation and she'd be forced to pretend, to smile and cook and say nice things, hoping her good feelings would return and she would remember her love and forget the comments of her friend who had sprayed words like poison across a table in a coffee shop.

But as the weeks went on she grew sad and could not remember her love, or forget the words, and she started imagining the ending. She saw omens everywhere: it had been nearly a year that they had been together; the cycle was bound to close. They did things they hadn't done in nearly a year, ate a kind of cake they hadn't had since the beginning. The omens were chilling; she tried to ignore them. And they multiplied.

'Please don't leave me,' she said to him one night, and he smiled and kissed her and said that he loved her; he wasn't about to leave her. And they were genuine, those words of his, but still it felt unreal. The weight of sadness and endings grew oppressive. She tried to imagine coping without him, and could not.

* * *

Sometimes you have to accept things: it is probably a good relationship, with a man that is kind to you, and you laugh together; he respects your need for privacy and aloneness, and there is love, of a sort, but are you soul mates?

It was the man in the restaurant so long ago who spoke of soul mates, and how he didn't think you were a soul mate, perhaps that's what ended that particular relationship. He was haunted by the idea of finding 'the one', and he had put that desire into you, even as

you scorned the idea, and couldn't quite believe in it. It means that here you are, years later, haunted by the need for passion, the need to find your soul mate, whatever that might lead to, whatever that might mean.

When problems crop up, the woman with the boyfriend remembers what her friend said about market value and that she thought the boyfriend wasn't good enough. The line is so thin between desire and lust, passion and liking, love and hate. Friendship hovers somewhere in between.

* * *

The couple came back from their holiday in Malawi. The man became a famous photographer. But they did not remain together. They broke up for the second time soon after returning to Johannesburg. Three months later she met the man she'd marry and have three children with. She did not forget the photographer, nor did she forget her love for him, imagining it moved in her still. At night, with the children asleep in their beds, and her husband beside her, she'd lie awake, waiting for the sleeping pills to take effect. She would think of that other man, the photographer with golden shoulders, tanned legs and a future ahead of him. She'd remember him that day at the lake, the way he had walked away from her, not looking back. It was over then, they both knew it. It was as though he was already imagining another future. But it had not been over for her. She had watched him go that day, not really believing that this was the end. A young boy had tugged at her arm, demanding dollars she didn't have, in the same way that her lover no longer had any feelings for her. She had not cried that night, nor for the rest of that badly planned holiday. Love had turned to indifference and then to a vague, porous hate almost as easily as the attraction had begun.

So, at night, this woman will lie beside her husband and she will

listen to his heavy breathing and she will gently touch him, because, yes, she loves him, but it is not the same. It cannot be the same. She will never fall out of love with that photographer, even though her husband loves her, and she, as his wife, loves him. When they fight she imagines the photographer divorced, wanting her again, begging her to see him, start up something new. But as she sighs she knows that will never happen. The thin line between love and hate fades and evaporates.

What is that moment, that final act that causes something to snap, what makes hate follow love? Who knows? A certain expression used too often. A bad temper in the morning, every time you yell because the toaster's dial is set too high and he, or she, keeps forgetting to turn it down to a lower temperature. There's also the shower door left hanging open once too often, and there's the need for solitude and independence, sometimes saying yes when you mean no.

Yet there are other relationships where the toaster is set too high and the shower door is open all the time, but it's okay somehow, because somewhere there's love and somehow that love keeps growing. The love mutates into acceptance, tolerance and muted passion. There's no way of knowing why or how it happens. It's simply there, through mornings of spilled coffee and rushed goodbyes, through deciding what to have for dinner, shopping when the sky's already turned dark because you've both worked so late.

* * *

A woman is having coffee with her friend. The one, the woman with the light brown hair, has a boyfriend. The other, with the dark brown hair, does not. She has lost weight. The other has put on weight. She is not happy about it, and her boyfriend tells her not to worry, but she minds and the extra weight is heavy on her. She does not like

tight clothes or her breasts bulging out of her bra. She won't buy new clothes until she's lost weight. But it isn't happening. It's nearly a year later. They sit in the same coffee shop, this time they drink cappuccinos; the thinner friend drinks hers with low-fat foam. The other indulges in full-fat foam, there are no more pretences; there is little need for low-fat milk when she's putting sugar in her coffee instead of sweetener and she'll probably have dessert later on.

They talk. The one woman has now moved in with her boyfriend. The other still doesn't have a boyfriend but is moving on in her life in other ways. Outside the sky is brown and grey, threatening rain. They talk about therapy, the influence of parents and how they hurt their children when they're just trying to express love. It is a long discussion, they both open up, pouring out emotions and experiences they have not shared before. There is some discomfort, some embarrassment. They talk around the issues. They have moved on. They talk about the boyfriend, about living together, how all the potential problems of divorce manifest in your twenties when you're first loving and sharing homes with men.

The one with the boyfriend has never lived with a man and is finding the experience strange. There are all sorts of masculine habits that she's never had to live with, she's never quite sure if these are normal or not.

They do not talk about the suitability of the boyfriend, or the possibility of marriage. Whether they skirt the issue out of fear of opening up a rift that shouldn't have been touched at all, or whether they skirt it because there are more interesting things to talk about is unclear. They are older and another year will be dying soon.

The coffee shop is empty now. It's muggy, the afternoon stretches out, there's another month to go before the new year, and the decisions that await them. They sip coffee and talk, looking into each other's eyes, connected by a thin thread of like.

Couple on the beach

A middle-aged woman sits on the edge of the lagoon and watches a young couple take photographs of each other. It is the beginning of a new year. It is low tide, and the waters of the lagoon have receded, leaving a vast expanse of wet beige sand. The couple stand in it with bare feet splayed, toes squelching into the coarse grains, taking photos with their expensive cameras.

It is nearly the end of their holiday together, and they are using up their film before they leave Knysna. They make an odd couple, as they take photos. The woman is wearing a smart jacket on this summer evening. It is too smart and too warm for this seaside town. The middle-aged woman wonders why she wears it, when her feet are bare and her jeans rolled up to reveal pinkly white legs. She can't be cold. Although there is a breeze blowing, it is not a cold night, the

day was warm, and the heat remains trapped as the sun goes slowly down. Perhaps it is to cover her body, perhaps she has gained weight and wants to hide behind her big black jacket. The middle-aged woman smokes a cigarette as she sits on the cement boulder and watches the couple. She knows all about gaining weight and hiding behind big clothes.

She has done it too. It is only now that she is older that she can afford to be freer, that she can wear anything and not be self-conscious and concerned that others, men, are looking at her, appraising her. She knows she is getting past the age of appraisal. She has read of the liberation that comes from middle-age – the loss of youth, menopause – she welcomes it.

Her hair is still mainly auburn, but lately she has been seeing the flash of silver streaks in it. They dart in and out between the dark strands, as though playing hide and seek, daring to be found.

The male half of the couple is tall and thin, as opposed to the female, who is shorter, slightly overweight, her gloriously auburn hair long and flying in the dusk's breeze. He is skinny and awkward in his body, as awkward as the woman is in hers. He is uncomfortable in the casual T-shirt he's wearing, and the middle-aged woman wonders why he wears it. Perhaps his partner, or whatever that girl is to him, asked him to wear it. The middle-aged woman has a feeling that he would be uncomfortable no matter what he wore. He is that kind of person, awkward in his body, in his life, hanging after this partner like a puppy dog eager to please her, compliant and soft, willing to do whatever it is that would make her like him, fall in love with him, something beyond this cold dismissive need of hers.

But she won't let him go yet, she needs him, although she does not like him. She needs him and that is her weakness, that's what makes her hate him, and hate a part of herself too. The middle-aged woman can see this as she smokes into the pale blue dusk, and

watches the lagoon recede from this couple. She watches the sea at the Heads, as it foams and dashes, as though the sea was a caged, wild animal wanting to get into this quiet piece of solitude, preferring the domestic peace of the lagoon to the endless deep. Her boyfriend keeps wanting to take her on the sea, perhaps on a small yacht, time and time again she refuses. She is afraid of the sea.

She smokes on the cement boulder, clutching the cigarette in her finger, looking at the beauty spot on her little finger that a man once found so attractive years ago, a dark mark on the fleshy folds of her baby finger. She watches the couple take photos as the sky darkens and fish burns in a house nearby.

* * *

The couple don't know where to go for supper. The woman is full from a sweet cinnamon pancake eaten late that afternoon. Her name is Ailsa. Her holiday companion, whose name is Mark, is hungry. Again. She doesn't know where all the food goes, or how it disappears on him, leaving him skinny and perpetually hungry. Once home to the tiny cottage they are renting for the week she tries to stall him. They watch TV, she puts more make-up over the day's sweat while he watches the news, and brushes her heavy hair again. It looks limp, it always sags in summer when it's hot, there is not much she can do about it.

'Hell, I'm hungry,' Mark emphasises from the bedroom, where he lies sprawled in front of the TV. It is their last night in Knysna, he wants it to be special.

Ailsa wants to get the hell out of here, go home as quickly as possible, be free from this friend who has shared her bed, her holiday, her life. She would like to go tonight, just ride straight through, back to Johannesburg, sixteen hours straight, to be home, away from this

man who is as tangled in her life as a fish caught in a net, as tangled and as messy.

‘I’m still not hungry,’ she calls from the bathroom. ‘Can’t we wait?’

They wait, talk is desultory, they make plans for the next day, deciding what time they should get up, pack, leave.

They eat dinner. They land up at the same place that sells the pancakes. This time Ailsa picks at a calamari salad, a salad that Mark will finish after she’s stopped pushing her fork around the bowl, eating when she’s not hungry. Only years later will she learn not to eat when she’s not hungry. It’s a simple thing, something she hasn’t learnt yet.

The waiter serves them, beaming, bringing plates, taking away plates. Mark leans close to her, talking quietly. Ailsa thinks he does this deliberately, to make them look like a couple in the eyes of the world. She hates the way he does this, she doesn’t want anyone to know they are together, she wants to shake him off like a bad smell. She leans back as though to tell the world that they are not really together. Mark makes small talk with the waiter as well, and Ailsa simply cannot shut off her disgust.

She looks away, distant, cringing. Mark’s stupid, meaningless conversation falls awkwardly into the music and hollow of the restaurant. The waiter, she thinks, appraises her, looks her up and down, wonders why she is with this man who makes stupid, unintelligent conversation, and drags her out to eat when she is not hungry.

There is dessert for him. She is so tired, so very tired, it’s early still and yet all she wants is to go sleep. Mark again makes plans for the next morning. He talks on, Ailsa adds a little to the conversation, trying to find something new to say, but it is impossible. They have said the same things now, to each other, for days on end.

It is exhausting being nice, not getting irritated. Ailsa hasn’t wanted to fight, not this time, now that everything has fallen back on only

the two of them. There have been irritations, dishes unwashed, not enough time for herself, a feeling of frustration at his helplessness. She is his life, she knows that now, and because she is his life, she cannot shake him off.

‘I’m in love with you, Ailsa,’ he had told her months before as they sat in a lounge in her parents’ home eating chocolate-covered nuts in front of a fire. ‘I fell in love with you. One day a few months ago I woke up and thought, “Hell, I’m in love with Ailsa!” What do you think of that?’

Ailsa had sighed in the bright lounge with its glaring overhead lights and dim wall brackets, the flames crackling in the silence, the fire her father insisted on making every winter, hauling in logs and setting the stone fireplace blazing in the smart lounge.

‘I know,’ she had said. ‘I’ve known for a long time now, the way you look at me. But I’m not ready, Mark. I’m not ready for a new relationship.’

Mark had looked at her then, the hard sharp face dissolved into vulnerabilities, stripped bare of its usual arrogance.

How could she hurt him? How could she hurt him the way she’d been hurt by the man she’d fallen in love with, and then been cast aside by as easily as they had come together? A year later, and she was left nursing a bruised heart, eating chocolate-covered nuts bought by a man who said he was in love with her, who had never fallen in love before and now said he loved her.

She needed him. She needed him for the friendship and for the soft pliancy of his weakness. As long as he was in love with her she could mould him or break him or twist his desires. She needed him because she needed people around her to stave off something unmentionable, and she needed, now, a man to say he loved her, and here he was, Mark, saying he loved her. And all she said was that she was not ready for another relationship.

Years later she would have said, perhaps, that she could not love him, that he wasn't her type – but on that night she could only suck chocolate off a nut and tell him she was sorry, and let him massage her feet for her.

He'd never even kissed a woman; the girl he'd asked to the matric dance hadn't even come to the after party with him. He'd plucked up the courage many times after to ask women out, but invariably they said no. He didn't know if it was because his stammer grew worse when he asked them out, or if it was because he was so skinny, or if it was the fact that he lived at home still, a man in his late twenties. His mother had told him to wait. She reminded him that his own father had only married in his thirties. There's plenty of time, she'd say, when he tried to talk to her about it. She did not help. She brushed hair from his eyes in a gesture of tenderness, and cooked his favourite foods and complained to him about her unfeeling husband, but she did not help.

He started noticing Ailsa after her break-up from James. They went, as friends, to movies and plays. They ate supper, as friends. This was even when she was still with James. He couldn't believe it was that serious, if she could go out to supper with him one night, the next with James while still hoping that he, James, would fall in love with her.

Sitting in the office they both worked in, she'd wonder aloud to him, asking if he thought James liked her, and then she'd describe James's actions and words. Or did Mark think that James regarded her simply as a friend? Mark had no answers.

It was only long after she finally asked and found out the answer to her questions, and spent long times behind locked doors, emerging tear-eyed, clutching the Valium the receptionist pressed into her hands and life.

He first noticed her kindness and gentleness, her shy way of talking and her fear of hurting anyone. He noticed the way she ate, delicately, with her small hands fisted around a spoon, or cupping a cappuccino, the way she wiped her mouth, the way she took care not to let the food spill, or catch in the corners of her mouth. He noticed this and thought she was a nice person. She took the time to listen to him, to go out with him. Here, at last, was a woman who did not run away, or make excuses that she was involved. She stayed and listened. They saw more movies, and one night, after drinks at a neighbourhood restaurant, he told her his greatest fear about having sex. He thought his penis was too small, and Ailsa stared into the darkness of the car, and said she'd only known one man, and his penis hadn't been that big, and that it didn't matter anyway. And there was so much more to sex than a large penis.

'Besides, when it gets big it gets big enough!' she'd laughed into the inky night as they sat in the car. She hadn't yet asked him into the house, and later he was glad: would he have felt so free, so uninhibited in the house where her parents could have heard him?

The next morning he phoned her and thanked her for their talk. It felt like a veil was lifting, like light was coming in through fog and murk. He felt grateful too, grateful for her kindness, for the fact that she listened to him. But he didn't understand it.

He fell in love, instead. That's what he'd tell people years later. That he had fallen in love with her soft gentle brown eyes, and the long lashes and the thick wavy auburn hair, and the beauty spot on her little finger. He stared across at her day after day in the open-plan office and walked with her to the shops at lunch time and got close enough to her to smell her sweat and perfume mingling in a heady mixture that made him dream and fantasise in his narrow lonely bed in his own parents' house. And then he fell in love, simple as that.

He could not tell her, although he tried. He found out what her

feelings for James were, and found out she was still in love with him, she was obsessed by that love, that man whom Mark had met only once.

Mark spoke about a woman he really liked, and she said tell me more, and he tried to hide it and eventually it came out. And she could not reciprocate his love for her as she ate his chocolate-covered nuts and let him take off her boots and knead her feet into submission. He kneaded and caressed and looked at her, wanting to kiss her and touch her breasts, he'd never touched breasts before, but had to make do with tepid coffee and the smooth curved muscles of her feet.

* * *

On their last night on holiday, away from Knysna, they find themselves booked into a grim, one-star hotel in a small town in the Karoo. It is clean, but plain. There are no lamps and the beds are two singles pushed apart. The bathroom is white and clinical, the curtains threadbare. The mattresses are lumpy and once more, Ailsa's supper sits hard and rocky in her stomach. Again, she had eaten when she wasn't hungry. A half a day riding in the car, the sun beating down, trying to get sleep, feeling exhaustion snatching her, trying to get away from the situation, the holiday, the man driving the big car through the sun-baked Karoo desert, the endless miles of scrubby, shrimp-like plants crouching over the dry earth.

They had eaten supper at an American steakhouse, the only restaurant open in town on a Saturday night. A Chinese restaurant was closed, and a grand elegant hotel that Mark wanted to go was expensive and had a set meal. Anger had hovered in the air. Mark had said he simply wanted their last night to be special.

'I'm not going to spend all that money on a three-course meal that I'm not hungry enough to eat!' she had retorted.

‘Okay,’ he’d replied, but conversation died in the steakhouse.

Still, after eating and coming back and undressing and washing their faces and brushing teeth and getting into their single beds, she lets him come into hers, and he is hard, as always, and she lets him have sex with her. Again, it is unsatisfactory, he comes too quickly, there is no joy for her. He tries to find her secret spot, and sometimes he gets it, but never for long enough. He always misses the mark, and she grows tired of his fumbling, and that is that.

The bed is too narrow. He lies against her for a while, his hard bony body offering little comfort, sinking away into the sheet and the pillows, there is always an elbow he doesn’t know what to do with. He does not know how to hold her, or to run his hands around her soft hips and belly, to trace her scars with love.

Ailsa lies there and thinks this man is as cold as the one before. But, she doesn’t love this one. He moans as he comes and she shuts off, his pleasure sounds an irritation in the dark room. He comes outside of her (she doesn’t want to get pregnant), and goes to the bathroom to clean himself up, turning on the hard white light. She watches his limp penis dangling, body angular and bent as an old man’s.

She hates him then, she tries to love him as he cleans her up, and hates him. She lies there passive in the white light streaming from the bathroom, and he cleans her between the legs, smoothing the white sperm away from her stomach into the wet toilet paper, and she doesn’t even mind that he sees her naked, the imperfect body, the swelling of it, the scars, the unfeminine-like trail of dark hair. She doesn’t mind, she doesn’t care.

‘That’s probably the last time we’ll do it,’ he says matter-of-factly as he drifts off.

He knows that’s it. She’s told him she is not in love with him. He knows that when the holiday is over she will finally find the strength

to call a halt to this. That they will not have sex and she will not try to control her temper with him, or hide her irritation.

The sex had started a few days earlier, the night before the new year. Early in the morning before she had forced him into her.

‘Are you ready?’ she’d whispered.

‘I suppose I have to do it.’

He’d drunk champagne after they’d done it. He’d opened the bottle and toasted the event. He couldn’t believe he’d done it, kept exclaiming over it, blue eyes big, mouth agape, sitting up in bed with a wineglass while she lay there, thinking, Get off it!

It was a relief finally, even though he was quick, and she wanted something slower, something more. She almost called him James, then didn’t call him anything at all, his name behind the other one, a name she had to grope for in her head.

She felt triumphant, she’d completed the cycle, stolen his virginity, forced him through that final border, showed him love and sex and kissing and lying in bed together. She’d broken her own barrier too, remembering sex a year earlier, the cold, silent night, the man who slipped off into his own single bed, the pimple that sprouted the morning after on her breast. Fat and white and filled with pus. She had squeezed it in the mirror, it splattered against her fingers, against the silver metal, as she clutched a towel around her, the day after she wasn’t a virgin anymore. There was no blood that morning, just oily pus.

* * *

It had started earlier than this trip to Knysna though. It had been like a dance. After the night he said he loved her she’d agreed to go away with him. They both needed a holiday, he argued.

Over a long weekend they ran away to the mountains in the east, a deserted chalet in the shadow of snowy peaks, the pale watery beginnings of summer present in the heat of the day, the mornings and nights capped with cold. She let him caress her, it started off as a massage, a drink, the pale afternoon light coming in as he picked off her clothes, his hands moving further, getting warmer. No sex, he was a virgin, a Christian, didn't believe in sex before marriage.

But there were two bodies naked, the sordid details of an unmade bed in the waning afternoon, the silence of exhaustion as they forced food into their mouths in the hotel restaurant later, hair hastily combed, clothes piled up, putting make-up on.

'But I don't want you to look pretty for other men!' And she rolled her eyes at him, choking on the cliché. Was he saying it to flatter her, or because he'd read it or heard it said? Or did he actually mean it? She put the make-up on, like she always did, and shoved the food in her mouth, conversation dead between them, the restaurant emptying.

They tried it one morning, but they couldn't get the condom on, they didn't seem to know how, and she was dry and sore. He wasn't ready. She wasn't ready.

She pulled away, then pulled towards him, craving love, affection, dancing around his own wants the way he danced around hers.

At times she even thought she saw that old hardness and sarcasm she'd first glimpsed in him, that had made her recoil away from even friendship with him. She accused him, abused him. Told him it had to end, she wasn't in love. And the touching would stop for a while, and then start up again. She was starving, famished, she sucked and sucked at his dry orange, wanting more, wanting something else, disgusted with herself, with her need to love and be loved.

She was excising James's ghost, this was the way she'd get rid of him: by having sex with another man she'd be over him. Once she'd sex with someone else she could get on with her life. She could forget

James, forget Mark, be free to find someone new.

'I can't hurt you,' she told Mark as they lay together.

'It doesn't matter. You've already hurt me. I fell in love with you and you can't reciprocate. So you have hurt me.'

'I don't want to be like James.'

'It doesn't matter.'

James lay beside them, a ghost with presence and shadow and a history. Mark asked her all sort of questions about James, what he was like, the way he treated her, what she had loved about him, as though he could appropriate the other man's abilities and qualities and thus make her fall in love with him.

The dancing continued. She could not let him go, he came to fill up all the crevices of her life, till she knew she'd never be alone if she didn't want to. He'd be there, as easy as an old armchair, she could phone him at any time, they'd see a movie, go to a play. There was no need to phone anyone else. The blanket grew tighter, it was secure, no need to risk being hurt with anyone else. One night, driving home with him, she stared at the black streets and heard him talk into the darkness, and again felt that frustration, and thought, maybe this is it. Maybe I must accept this. Maybe there won't be anyone else. He is not a bad man, simply a boring man.

The time passed. She pushed him away again. She wouldn't let him touch her, it had to stop. He was simply getting hurt.

* * *

On the last day of their holiday she is happy. She points her camera at the flat Free State farms and bubbly storm clouds and takes pictures. They have coffee in a restaurant attached to a highway garage. Mark watches as she laughs and gets enthusiastic. He smiles with her, the tensions of the last few days dissolved. He is tired, but he is happy.

He wishes she could have been as happy a few days ago, back in Knysna. He does not want to return. He goes back to work the next day, she won't be there.

He'll miss her in bed at night, the warmth, the miraculous warmth of another body, and her smell, that sweet smell that lingers in her hair, on his hands, he cannot get enough; or her buttery feel as he slides his hands along her hips, her stomach, doing as she asks him. It is all overwhelming as he puts his hands lightly on her, barely touching her. Only when she protests does he cup her stomach or her breasts, trying to give her what she wants, what he cannot give.

It feels like going back into darkness, although he feels changed. She flirts with the waiter in the restaurant. She is twenty-five, the waiter is a teenager. She feels older, finally like an adult, leaves a tip, spoons ice-cream into her mouth and tells him she's going to diet when they get back.

'I like you the way you are!' he protests.

I'm not doing this for you, she thinks. He watches her flirt, eat ice-cream, take pictures. It is like watching something fly away from you, like watching bubbles dissolve in the sunlight, like candyfloss melting on your tongue. A vague sweetness remains, a thick rough fur left on your teeth.

The sun goes down, you try to capture a sunset, the clouds come out blurred, an arm pokes out the corner of a photograph. There is one perfect photo, with the light radiating out from the clouds, and the clouds spill out into the frame. One perfect moment, before it all disappears.

* * *

A middle-aged woman watches as a couple take pictures of each other. She has lived here for many years. It is quiet, she can paint in

peace, and every few years she has boyfriends. Her paintings sell well enough for her to make a living. When the tide goes out, she goes down to the lagoon, smokes on the cement barrier, or walks on the sand, trousers rolled up, feet splayed in the coarse sand, the way she did on her first trip here years and years and years ago.

She had a dog when she first moved here, used to take him for walks but he died. And she has simply continued the ritual of her evening walks. It's a habit, a break from the day's work, a walk in the fading light, harsh lamps don't give her paintings the same look, she prefers to paint by daylight.

She has a boyfriend waiting in her house. He is younger than her, this season's lover. He lives far away, in a big city. He is a good lover, but now, so is she. She has finally learned to be loved, the men she loves now know how to find her spot and take their time. She has sex, she has lovers, she has a canvas opened wide against the window that faces one of the hills of brown and green vegetation. There, in the landscape and gentle lights, her works shout with anger and despair and hard modern living.

Sometimes her daughter comes to visit. She expects her mother to paint soft gentle flowers and landscapes, to mirror this land she lives in. But she doesn't. Her mother paints from long ago, when she was young, and she remembers what that feels like.

She paints young people – angry young people who don't know where they're going, who are still finding themselves, who wear hard bright colours and stare out of the canvas with hard accusatory looks.

Her latest painting though is different. Unlike the others it is a soft gentle painting one done in pastel blues and pinks and light whitish colours. A couple takes photographs of each other on a beach. There is a tall skinny man who holds a camera taking photographs of a short

woman with auburn hair blowing in the wind, smiling uncertainly into the orb of his lens. They wear old-fashioned clothes, jeans that flare at the ankles, tie-dyed shirts, it is a long time ago.

Somehow, though, the lines are jagged, the man stands too far away, the woman is too uncertain. There's a sense of unease in the picture, of disturbed lives.

Sitting on a cement boulder a middle-aged woman edges into the distance, smoking cigarettes, watching the past unfolding before her. The middle-aged woman wears a red top, it too is jarring, like a flash of blood.

It is all intermingled as Ailsa puts the final touches to her latest painting, making the red of the top harder, more violent, more bloody. The past doesn't fade, it may lie sleeping and then it comes seeping out through the cracks in your life – in a painting, a piece of music, a movie that reminds you and perhaps, makes you cry, makes you go back through the tunnel of memories and time. Till you stand in the vortex, watching a younger self, wishing you could give advice, tell her where not to go, where she went wrong, how, if she leaves half an hour earlier, or attends a certain dinner she refused to once, she would meet a certain man, not this one, nor that one in the kitchen. But it's all impossible, to reach back as she reaches forward, asking, always asking questions of her older self, at twenty, at thirty, now at fifty, she tries to peer at herself of sixty, seventy. It never works. The future woman walks away, face in shadow, body turned away, refusing to answer questions: 'Live your own life!' she would be saying if she could talk. Instead you're left with the present, even as it dissolves rapidly into the past, memories swirling away.

Ailsa sighs, catches a piece of her auburn hair, pulls out a silver strand and holds it to the light, fascinated as always by the luminosity of her white hairs, the absence of pigment and the way sun shines right through.

Collage

She moved through the stalls at the fête, a medieval ring of flowers on her blonde hair, a crushed velvet skirt lightly sweeping the ground. She smiled at her friends, biting into a soft, round doughnut.

The day was beautiful, winter seemed to have been suddenly swept away, and in its place was pleasant warmth, a promise of more to come.

Her name was Chloe. I rolled the name over and over again on my tongue. It tasted good – it tasted of air, of wafers, of the chocolate between the wafers, of caramel coating on candy bars.

I snapped my long lens into place, and focused on the face laughing and dancing out of view. She screwed up her face to bite, and I clicked. I was so far away, she would not know I was taking pictures of her. It simply looked like I was taking pictures of the general scene.

The camera clicked on, as I concentrated on the eyes, the mouth, the breasts, the arms with the light fuzz, the throat swiftly swallowing the sweet stuff.

I watched her sitting on a chair in the sun, joined by the other teachers. I approached her, big smile on my face. I called out her name. She looked up, she couldn't place the face.

'Hi, remember me, it's Tyra. I met you last year when you came with Tim to that party?'

She nodded nervously.

'I'm just wandering around, taking photos for the paper. We're looking for a front page pic. Would you mind if I took one of you, maybe with some of the children?'

She started to shake her head. 'Oh, I look like such a mess, can't you try someone else?'

I wouldn't budge.

'No, you look fine,' I said, taking in the soft eyeliner around the eyes, the sun beaming on the fair skin. A group of her pupils had gathered around.

So I snapped the photo as they sat on the small lap, this posse of medieval make-believes, Chloe smiling uncertainly at the lens.

I had her then. Later I would blow the face up big, bright, bold. She'd never know I had cut the others out.

'I think I've got some really lovely pics, you look great,' I said as I packed up my stuff to go. 'I'll call you, so you can select a few, if you want.'

She nodded again, pleased to see me leave. As I walked out the school gates, a group of men in kilts started up on the bagpipes. Scotland reached me at the start of a hot Johannesburg summer.

The photographs were beautiful. Chloe's features shone out luminously beneath the dull, yellow lights in the darkroom. The

face expanded as I cranked up the enlarger and exposed her over and over again. I had lots of expressions, and smiles. I had a front page pic – I also had a gallery of Chloe. These black and whites were just for me.

I didn't tell Tim that I had seen Chloe at the fête. I saw him that night and we went out for supper with a group of his friends. I didn't say a thing.

I watched him through the haze of a heavy, red wine, saw the grinning, heard the jokes, joined in. He was happy, he was satisfied. He reached out for my hand and held it. I looked at him and thought about what he and Chloe had looked like as a couple.

Her image swam around the table as I realised all his friends had known her, had known them together. No one said anything, but her presence bristled in the atmosphere.

Were they all comparing me to her, making notes, thinking this one may be taller, but was fatter and didn't have the same refined accent?

When my fork slipped and clattered to the floor, they turned to me, and I could feel hate and pressure burning in their eyes.

Undressing to go to bed that night, I told Tim I'd seen Chloe, had taken pictures of her. He didn't look at me. He was silent.

'Don't you want to know what she looks like now?' I asked.

'Why did you take pictures of her? There must have been others you could have taken pictures of?'

'There were. But I wanted her. I wanted to hold her in my grip for a change. To see her through my eyes, not through yours.'

'What does she look like?' he asked wearily. 'How is she?'

'She's fine. She's beautiful. I'll show you the pictures. You'll see them in the paper anyway.'

Tim groaned. He was suddenly sober.

I turned over and went to sleep.

Events moved quickly after that. I phoned her the following week. She'd seen the photo in the paper, and said how nice she looked. She even managed a quiet thank you. She asked about buying some of the prints.

I jumped in straight away. 'For a friend, I'll do it as a favour. Don't worry about the cost. Shall I meet you somewhere?'

It was as easy as that. I met her at an Italian bistro. I spread the glossy photos in front of her, some colour, some black and white.

'You really are good,' she complimented me. 'I hate having my picture taken, I come out looking awful. But you, you've got something else. They're wonderful.'

'And you're a wonderful subject,' I said.

She shrugged. I watched her consuming the thin pink salmon, bringing the flesh to her mouth, biting delicately like a kitten.

The restaurant hummed with noise, waiters rushing, plates clattering, a tenor singing arias in the background, and I simply stared at her, drinking her gentle body in, and holding back.

Patience, patience, I told myself, as I paid the bill for us both, refusing her offers. I was in control. She didn't even know Tim and I were involved.

And after that it was easy to become friends with her. It was a skill I had learned when I needed to, and I was good at it. I could befriend anybody I liked. It was harder with those I didn't, but even then I managed.

I made love to Tim, staring at the blonde chest hairs and thinking of Chloe, rolling her name over my tongue, her face swirling around in my head. I touched the soft spots on my body pretending it was

her doing the touching; pretending it was her I was stroking. I faked my pleasure, mechanically, as a machine might.

He didn't know I had become friends with his ex-girlfriend. I kept that secret from him, as I did so many other things. My job was a convenient scapegoat: whenever I needed to, I invented the excuse of work and went off to see Chloe. There was always a photograph to be taken somewhere. Tim never suspected.

And slowly it happened.

Chloe spilled out the story between her and Tim: the recriminations, the misunderstandings, the fights. The passion that fuelled their roaring arguments, and then brought them together again.

I sucked in the details greedily, storing them in my head as a sort of a collage. When I'd listened hard enough, the sweet, fond memories came through: and I heard of their holidays, the presents they had given each other, the plans they had made to go overseas after their wedding.

It felt as if I was being torn to shreds by starving animals as I listened to these details. Those dull aches you read about in cheap romances existed, came, went, returned.

'We really did love each other,' she'd sigh, 'but we couldn't get past all the problems.'

I thought of Tim, we'd become involved because it had seemed like a good idea. We'd been only vague friends before he and Chloe split up; then we grew friendlier and pretended a type of concern.

But as I lay in his arms, or as he touched me, the gestures felt hollow and lacking. There was tenderness in them, but it wasn't love; there was kindness, but not love. Some kind of possessive need on his part, on my part.

And all the time I lay back as he pumped me and I thought of

Chloe. Her sweet, delicate face, the soft expressions, her full mouth moving silently in my thoughts.

I was falling in love, but it wasn't with this man trying to please me.

Tim had put his past to bed, so to speak. He refused to talk about Chloe, making me stop my desperate questioning. 'It's over, Tyra,' he'd say, hand in my hair, 'I love you now.'

But I knew love didn't die that easily, saw him spewing out these lies with a straight face, and I sipped whatever alcohol was around.

There were good times. Nights out. Parties. Dinners. Concerts. Plays. We went everywhere, I refused to stay home. Exhausted, falling into sleep, waking up to stare at the ceiling in the middle of the night, and falling asleep again.

It happened every night. When I was with Tim he worried about it, but I knew it was no good. Jealousy woke me, clawing at me. I craved something, so I drank more, ate more, and that helped me sleep. I watched Tim's arms go around me, and his muscles felt like hot pink air. I couldn't breathe like this, I rolled away. He was so nice, so considerate, and yet he couldn't give me what he'd given Chloe.

She invited me out on a picnic one Sunday.

I told Tim I was off to do a job and couldn't spend the day with him. He was used to my going off suddenly. He said he wanted me to be free. 'I was so obsessive and possessive with Chloe, you must go off and do what you like.' So I did.

There were friends from Chloe's work, classical music playing in the gardens, white wine and the slippery feel of Chloe's hand in mine. When I looked surprised, she was smiling, squeezing. I squeezed back. I wanted to eat the silky smooth skin, run my tongue over it forever, tasting those cheeks, that mouth. The sun highlighted her hair. Her

eyes were large, green, playing with me. The music tinkled into the background, the friends faded, we held hands.

We made love one night, each exploration new to Chloe. I showed her how, we laughed together.

‘How did you know?’ I whispered.

‘The way you looked at me, the way I looked back. You never spoke about men, I just assumed.’ I kissed her hurriedly, then slowly. The skin was smooth. I relaxed finally. For the first time in months.

When we turned together in bed, her small body cupping mine, I floated away. The skin like silk, the body hairless. I curled into her, hoping it would never stop.

Tim was getting restless. Increasingly I slept over at Chloe’s, juggling my life, making up phantom jobs, running from him to Chloe, from Chloe to him, keeping the two lives secret. Sleeping with him, taking his smell to Chloe, and then taking Chloe’s smell back to him. The irony was not lost on me. Won’t they ever smell each other? I wondered, but they never did.

I loved Chloe, watched her every move. I spoke about women in my life, leaving out the men. I wanted her to think I belonged entirely to her sex. No threats that way, easier too. The thing is, you can love both men and women. The man’s muscular body and hairiness, the sense of his strength; and at the same time drink in a woman’s perfume, her softness, her pliancy. The two loves exist together.

And she didn’t question why she was doing this with me. When I asked her, she said she wasn’t sure of it herself. She didn’t think she was gay. I’d just caught her at a bad time, that was all.

But I knew.

She was emotionally fragile after the break-up of a relationship that had been leading to marriage, starting a new job, with all the stresses that entails. I had caught her drifting, given her friendship when she

needed it most. I had given her love, and now she responded.

I knew she didn't love me, and would one day leave. I knew this as clearly as I knew my own name.

I devoured her in my sleep, my dreams, with my hands, all the time knowing she would one day go.

I was playing my role in making her whole. But one day it would all be over. This was a cold, hard fact which I could not forget or ignore.

All the while I clung to Tim, never letting on, yet never allowing him to come closer. And he accepted it. And the more he accepted it, the more I realised how hollow and empty this whole thing was.

But, as so often in the past, I watched this all through a glaze of unreality. I observed the events unfolding; the people moving in and out of the shadows; no one touched me.

I feigned empathy and concern when friends and colleagues told me a love affair had ended or a mother was dead, but inside I was hard and icy. It had to be that way.

Except with Chloe. I watched her at nights. We had made a social group of our own, and went out with her friends, sometimes with mine.

The way she flirted with the male waiters, male cashiers, male barmen – I could feel her slipping away before I had had a chance to have her, hold her, possess her.

I didn't bother to ask if she loved me.

I continued asking about Tim; making her talk till she cried and held me, thinking I was trying to heal her. I'd make her repeat the old stories, scraping amongst the facts for a new morsel, a new insight, hearing the old stories out of comfort. It was a strange relief to hear them, the familiarity of them. I wanted to know everything – I was building up a picture of Tim and Chloe's love.

Tim had begun to talk, to give me scraps, brief sketches. A restaurant would remind him of a meal with Chloe; a movie repeated on TV that he had seen with her; she had liked that particular perfume. I let it all drip out of him, and he too thought I was trying to heal him.

They healed, Chloe and Tim, together they healed. They didn't realise how close they were, following each other all the way.

I was good at these passionless romances. It had begun with a bloodless kiss in a nightclub at fifteen. My first. I don't remember his face or his name. I was so high on Sambuca and champagne. Doing it mattered more than anything else.

Bloodless passions. Encounters that landed in bed; went on a few months, one even lasted eight months. I was not good at sustaining them; and I was not interested. I was bouncing around from man to woman to man, drinking greedily. And yet nothing in me was ever satisfied.

Now, at twenty-four, I was falling in love with a woman. I felt the barriers falling, going, and wanted to shrink away from all that was happening. Tim went away on a trip to the Okavango. He had asked me to come along, but I wanted to stay, to be close to Chloe, to watch her.

The collage of their lives together was almost complete. At night I replayed the stories in my head, imagining, embellishing and then remembering correctly.

I remembered the story about the weekend they'd driven to the coast to meet her family and the waves in my head were louder than they'd ever been in real-life; the sand grainy under my feet; the eyes of her relatives admiring and holding me, congratulations in their eyes. Suddenly I too had her blonde hair and her slight, slim figure as

we made love, the sea sighing outside our window. Tim adored me, he'd do anything for me – give up dreams, hopes, friends, ambitions. He would be there every time I groaned; he would be there if I felt too weak to be capable.

I'd wake up from these reveries sobbing, feeling ruined. At night the darkness pressed down on me, mocking. In the mornings I had to crawl out of bed, forcing myself up, out. The world, living, was such an effort.

I thought of Chloe constantly, I took photographs of her and Tim and superimposed the two. They smiled at each other, together again, as I knew they could be one day.

And my heart literally ached with jealousy. Emotions have power, they are physical, they push through you, leaving great open spaces in you that cannot be concealed or filled. I was sick with jealousy. I put my finger down my throat and vomited. My body grew larger as I drank and ate, and Chloe touched me and wondered what was happening.

But as usual I covered up, I was a survivor. Storms passed over me, nothing seemed to age me. I still looked eighteen.

Chloe was so perfect, stuck in that little world, surrounded by other teachers, tall old buildings and admiring pupils. She walked there effortlessly. There was nothing to disturb the stasis. She'd achieved exactly what she wanted. She was whole; she told me how happy she felt now, and how I'd helped her. I smiled, and held her tight, and felt her slipping away more quickly than I could ever hold her.

I had to do something. I couldn't sit and watch the only thing I'd ever loved trickle away. When we slept with each other, I'd wake up in the middle of the night, watching her, her hair streaming around her pillow, the waist that nipped in so neatly, the wide-open, vulnerable

face. I knew I could not let this go, could not live without it.

And I knew I couldn't bear it if someone else possessed her. I thought of her going and burst the blood vessels in my eyes. There were red spots that lingered days after the fits were over.

The solution was very simple.

One night, while she slept, I cried, and then ate pudding from her fridge, and drank what I could out of her liquor cabinet. Half the night went by as I stuffed my mouth, getting fuller and fuller with the sweet, mushy mousse she had bought for me.

We had been to a heavy party, and she'd been drinking as I'd never seen her drink before. She was senseless. Collapsing into bed, she'd said: 'God, Tyra, I've never done this before, the whole world spinning is in on me. I hate to think what I'm going to feel like in the morning!'

I was bigger and heavier than her, so it was easy to smother her. It was not hard to hold the pillow over her face, knowing now that she'd always be mine. The memories Chloe had of her and Tim belonged to me now. So she was gone. But a new life could begin.

While she lay there, I sagged beside her on the bed, and called out my new name, 'Chloe ... Chloe ...'

Sour milk, cold ash

Jude has ringlets of dyed blonde hair and big, sloping eyes rimmed in fashionable black eyeliner. Her long, lean body is sheathed in a peach skin-tight dress. These are the looks she uses to catch men. She's not using them now, talking to her friend, Dale, but soon she'll lower her head, drop her eyes demurely, and catch another one. It's so easy.

'You've got to hurt them,' Jude is telling Dale. She fingers Dale's own fine blonde hair. 'Look at this,' she says, 'look at this power, this beauty. You could kill men with this.' She draws hard on a cigarette.

It's Saturday night. They are sitting in a nightclub peppered by a sparse selection of neighbourhood locals. A band is screeching out a rhythm to which some are trying to dance. But The Wild Monkey is anything but wild, in a neighbourhood that has no night life to talk of. It'll probably close down soon.

For now Jude and Dale are sitting watching the evening go by. Jude stops talking, and she shouts their orders to the bartender.

'This place is so dull,' she says, rolling her eyes.

Dale agrees, drinking cider, hoping to get in the mood for this place. It's difficult. The dance floor is deserted.

'We'll get pissed,' Jude decides. 'We'll get so pissed we won't know where we are.'

It seems like a good plan. The trouble is, there is nowhere else to go. Both eighteen, but they still haven't got driver's licences. Sometimes they get a ride with other friends, but tonight that has proved impossible. So they have ended up watching the evening dissolve in waiting.

Jude dances, high on rum and coke. She stands in the middle of the dance floor in the skin-tight dress that hugs her body and reaches her ankles. Standing there alone, she is spotlighted, only a few others are dancing.

Dale watches. Men stare hungrily at Jude, taking in the body beneath the dress.

Jude dances slowly, curving her body around the cacophony of sounds, dancing slower and slower as the pace hots up. She can feel those eyes on her; the rum has made her head spin around. She wanders back to the counter where Dale is talking to a group of people who have just walked in, people Jude doesn't know. Jude forgets their names after the introductions have been made. She orders another drink. Dale's involved in her conversation. She won't miss her.

Jude wanders off.

She walks into the toilet. The harsh fluorescent glow makes her skin look alabaster, her eyes stand out hollow and empty. She smears shadow around her them, picks at her lashes, coated thickly in mascara, smacks her lips in red.

There's a rattle floating in one of the toilets. She wonders how it got there.

A girl is swallowing some pills by the basins. Jude watches as her throat moves once, twice, three times with every pill. The girl catches her eye, doesn't even smile as she swallows again. Her eyes are dead.

The band is packing up. Dale's been looking for her. 'Listen, we're all going to Club Ashtray, John's got his dad's minibus, there's place for us. Let's go. There's nothing happening here.'

Jude nods.

It's one in the morning as they drive through slumbering suburbia. She notices Dale talking to her friends. Jude doesn't like them much. They all seem so stiff, so proper, so earnest. But she doesn't care. They've got a ride, that's what counts. She digs out comps for Club Ashtray. She has piles of them, each time she goes they give her more. She'll never use them all. She looks at Dale, suddenly grateful to her, for knowing all these people.

Club Ashtray is packed as usual. Jude gets onto the dance floor and ignores the group. Now and again she smiles to let everyone know she's there. It seems to reassure them. The music is loud, hard, pumping, it's good. They're playing all her favourite songs. Dale shouts in her ear that they're going onto the outside balcony. Jude follows, distanced by a drink someone put in her hand, distanced by her want.

She had told Dale once, 'I've done it in alley ways, in garden sheds, in a bakkie, in some guy's bed high on speed, and in a room with Led

Zeppelin on the walls and Metallica playing in the background.'

Dale had just looked at her, and asked when she had first had sex.

'Fourteen,' said Jude. 'It was really quick. And it was sore.'

She watches Dale now, wondering why they are friends. Dale seems so much happier with these other people around her. She's almost disregarding her, although she has tried now and again to include Jude in the conversation. Dale's friends are so normal, it's boring, Jude thinks, leaning her head against the railing. The night air is cold, the bars are hard. Conversations are starting and stopping around her. Others are silent, listening to the music, or high on something.

'Don't you ever worry about getting pregnant? Or getting Aids?' Dale had often asked when they first met.

'No. I know it's stupid. But I just can't help it. Sometimes the guy's got a condom. But mostly not. I don't know. I just never fall pregnant.'

She didn't worry about Aids. She didn't think she'd ever get it.

That much she knew, somewhere inside of her.

Dale flicks her hair back, speaking to one of the guys in the group. She's wearing her usual jeans. Suddenly, Jude wants to get up and shout at her, ask her why for once in her life she doesn't wear something more sexy, a low top, shorts, a dress, anything. But Dale doesn't dress like that. She could stuff men up if she wanted. Stuff them up and ignore them, till they wanted more and she wouldn't give it.

Jude goes back to the dance floor. Her body aches as she scans the place.

She stands back for a while, watching, drinking rum, feeling it melt through her. A guy taps her on the shoulder, smiling. She smiles back. She thinks she met him two weeks ago. She had been with a

friend of his, and vaguely remembers being introduced to him. She cannot remember his name.

‘Do you remember me?’ he asks.

‘Of course,’ she says. He gets her a drink, asks her to dance.

Jude asks where his friend is tonight. The guy just shrugs. He must be somewhere else. So she dances with him instead, discovers his name is Jack.

He slips his arm around her. Soon they are colliding as they move together. His breath is hot above her ears, she can feel him breathing, his chest against her, firm and strong. The club is hot, bodies sandwiched onto the dance floor. Sweat is pouring down the front of her dress and her face, making her forehead prickle. He’s sweating too. A slightly meaty smell.

He forces his tongue into her mouth. That familiar rubbery sensation of tongue against tongue, Jude’s head stretches back as they kiss and dance. His hand circles her buttocks, she slips hers around his, but feels nothing through the solid denim.

Chest to chest, she feels his shirt soaked with sweat, her dress is also wet. He keeps on probing with his tongue and hands. Jude’s head is far, far away from her body, she feels almost as though she could watch herself from above. But that’s never happened. She always manages to stay inside her body. She wishes he’d do something.

Eventually he leads her away from the grind of the dance floor. ‘Come home with me,’ he hisses into her ear. She shakes her head, Dale is still somewhere around, and might miss her.

‘My flat’s just around the corner, I promise,’ he says.

Jude looks for Dale, then decides to take a chance as she can’t see her anywhere.

* * *

Running through the cool night air, she finds he told her the truth. He lives around the corner. They go through a deserted alley, to the front door of a derelict building. It's in darkness as they clatter through the silence up the staircase.

Jack is serious now. When he flings open the door, the dirty yellow bulbs illuminate the mattress on the floor, the Formica-topped table is surrounded by chairs, the sink is spilling over with dishes, the milk stands soured on the counter.

As usual it starts quickly. A speedy shooting off of clothes, those first few moments exploring bodies, when he says what a perfect little body she has, and how beautiful she is. These comments mean nothing. It's just a way of them trying to make her feel good. They need not bother, this is when they have her where they want her, this is what she's aimed for the entire evening.

He goes to work on her. She marvels at the uniformity in their difference. It's like they've all gone to the same school to learn this. He cups her breasts. He licks at her, gently, then builds up quicker and quicker till she's throbbing. He enters her, that familiar warmth. Like a drug. Exactly what she needs.

Afterwards, they lie on his mattress.

He offers her coffee, if she wants. She doesn't, and the milk is off anyway.

The journey back is less exhilarating. This time she's cold, and the clinging sweat makes her even colder. When she shivers, Jack just looks at her.

Back in the pulsating hot club, she's still cold. Jack asks the bartender for paper, writes down her number, says he'll call soon.

Perhaps he will. She nods numbly as Dale comes toward her. They're leaving now.

She kisses Jack goodbye. Dale hadn't even missed her.

Well, it had been better than she expected. It was always more comfortable doing it on a bed.

The need is urgent, impatient, desperate. It comes mostly at night, somehow the darkness makes everything more intense, more frightening. Body and mind are hungry, the bed is empty, the sheets are cold. Jude knows that's when a warm hard cock can fill you up.

The warmth disappears by morning but Jude carries on, regardless. She wants more, she knows it, she would like these men to tell her she has a beautiful body because they love her, or think she's special, but for now there's this. The quickness that fills her up, rushing in to fill the cave of loneliness and hunger, it shuts away that great yawning emptiness that is every day. The fear of waking up and feeling the hard sunshine crush into your face, of walking through a house where aged parents are sleeping.

'Who was that guy you were with?' Dale asks.

'Jack. I met him through a friend. He kisses well.'

'Are you going to see him again?'

'Maybe ... if he calls.'

Patterns

1

I dreamed about you again last night. You were warm and funny as you helped me with some problem I had. It was so real, it felt just like old times. Except, back then, you did not like to help me with my problems, preferring to stay out of whatever would disturb the stasis.

I wondered then about the patterns in our lives and what brings us to the decisions we make, the people we choose to know. Whether we do it consciously or whether the reason is hidden somewhere back in our brains, somewhere that's not easy to find.

I dreamed about you, and all of the next day I remembered what it was like to have sex again. Your body was so strong and I held it often in my mind as people came to talk to me or tell me something. Sitting in training the lecturer's words were lost. I remembered you between my legs, your hands and arms draped over my body, the hairy feel of your naked chest, your neutral sweet breath.

It lasted only a day because I soon shut out of my mind what it had been like to have you as a lover, no matter how briefly. You're almost forgotten now, but there are bonds between us still, I can't ignore you entirely. But such are the patterns in our lives.

I wondered how it was that we came together, only to part so soon after. And I wondered if we'd met in another time in our lives whether that would have made the difference. What if we had been different people, or what if we'd met sooner – before you were so hurt? Would the patterns of life have eddied around us, swallowing us into the inevitability of the situation anyway?

It's so easy to speculate now when this no longer matters, and when we've both had time enough to step back from the great wound that was us.

Occasionally I wonder about you. Sometimes when I'm at work and the phone rings I get that old rush of enthusiasm and I wonder if it could be you.

But it is never you. If it is a man, it is not you, it is another man or woman wanting something, and I provide it.

But what if we'd been able to make the great leap, cross the divide of who we were? Could we have forced the barriers; the borders of our personalities, got on with the business of trying to find the happiness we both knew was out there, had to be out there?

When we were busy breaking up I thought about time. I was reading the book, *One*, by Richard Bach. In the book he was exploring other possibilities of living, how we can simply leap into another pattern,

how the forks in the road are so arbitrary. One decision affects our entire lives.

It was a difficult time then. Just before Christmas, and you had gone off to the coast with a female colleague of yours. I didn't know if we were ending or simply starting something else – perhaps a friendship out of the tangle of what we had become. I had never been so optimistic, strong, so determined to be cheerful. I had to be, I had to convince myself I could go on without you.

I could, I discovered that. It was only later that I discovered I missed you, and did not want to go on without you. But by then it was too late. I had hurt you, or you had hurt me. We were both good at retaliating. Was that our downfall?

The trouble was that I met you as you were coming out of your first real relationship with a woman called Bianca. She had hurt you hard. But I did not understand that. You were confused and that flummoxed me. It still does.

There was a time years ago, when we might have met at a lunch you attended. I was planning to go too, but I was studying. I did not have the money, as students invariably don't, and so our coming together waited a few years. That was before you met her, and I speculate over it. The irony is at that same lunch you met the friends I would get to know later on. And they would introduce us.

'Do you believe in fate?' you asked me that first night we went out. And I had to say no.

I said, 'For me fate is a witch clothed in black, hooked nose, warts, a hood. I can't believe in it.' I spoke to you about the concept of a 'higher self', that we all have something in us, higher than us. Of attracting to yourself what you need, good and bad. You were intrigued with the concept, you said you'd have to think about it, but that it

made sense. You didn't like the idea of not being in control of your life, which is what believing in fate presupposes. Neither did I.

I introduced you to something that I would question over a year later. Things now seem more predetermined and destined as I sit here, reflecting, noticing the patterns of our lives that came together, merging for a while.

Things moved after that first night we attended a wedding. Friends of ours had long since left for home by the time we emerged from our talking.

I had never had a man before. I had been kissed in the moonlight and told that I had beautiful breasts, but I had never had a man or wanted one as much as I would grow to want you. And I had never felt that same desire for that another man, the one who had almost succeeded in taking me to bed, surrendering my old-fashioned virginity.

But you were different.

I knew it then, that first night when you left near three in the morning.

2

Your name was Robert. It was a name that suited you. I looked it up in my book of names. From the old German Hrodebert, it means 'fame' and 'bright'. You were an artist, you were going to be famous. And you were indefatigably enthusiastic, as a friend of mine once described you.

We had been going out a few months. We hadn't defined it. A night lying next to each other in bed when you were drunk after a braai didn't count. You'd wanted me to lie with you the whole night.

But I couldn't. Not then. I thought I shouldn't. When everything in me was aching, asking for it.

But we were going nowhere. 'He hasn't even kissed you!' a guy I worked with exclaimed, and I pretended you'd tried.

One day a fortune teller told me you would be the man I would marry. Maybe from then I changed, expected more, got more frustrated when you still didn't touch me, and I looked in the mirror and thought I must be ugly. But her words seemed to confirm all that I had been feeling about you, and I became convinced of the truth of it. I had forgotten all I'd told you about fate, and I was falling deep. There was nothing to stop me.

Even the doom and gloom message from the Tarot cards did not do it. Remember that mutual friend, Lesley, who was responsible for us knowing each other? It was Lesley who read the cards, and did not say a word about us when they came up against everything that was about to happen, and still I went along with it.

But I was not well either. I looked to you for security, who knows why I thought you might be able to provide it. Perhaps because I believed as intrinsically and idealistically in love as you did. And perhaps because I was so tired, so tired from trying to get above it all, from earning a living, being a success, trying to get beyond the past. But I got so tired when I was with you, always sleeping, or trying to, snatching it wherever I could. I had never been like that before. Why were the stresses of being with you so overwhelming?

It's no use going into the feminist I had blossomed into at sixteen and seventeen. Oh yes, you and I argued about women changing their names after marriage. I railed against it, while you said if a woman loved a man she'd do it for him.

But we were talking in abstracts. Mostly everything promising had died by then.

I was no longer the feminist I'd wanted to be as a teenager. I was twenty-three, and I said you were wrong, but I had been also been working for a while by then. And I had grown used to arms around me, expressions of 'sweetie' or 'love' as strange men were introduced to me and thought it their due. I did not believe it was worth fighting against now.

And I was no feminist when it came to you. You called me a strong woman, but you were the one who led it all. I was too scared of it ending if it didn't. There's another irony, of course, that I ended it when I could no longer stand it. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

3

We made love on my grandmother's birthday.

We had gone down to your aunt's place in a little town in the Free State. We wanted to be alone. We wanted privacy to build up to what we both knew was inevitable.

It had been six months since we'd started going out. You'd slept over once on a pretence of not wanting to be around while your parents' chain-smoking visitors from America were in the house. We had lain together then, getting to know each other's bodies, techniques. But I was already starting to compare yours to other techniques I'd known.

We had gone camping after that, shared a tent. You'd wanted to do it then. I'd refused.

'I don't know what's happening between us,' I told you. 'I don't want to do it till I know.'

But you didn't know either. We talked long into the night. You were so hesitant and uncertain about starting up another relationship. All you knew was that you didn't want to get hurt again. Couldn't I understand that, you asked.

How could you throw me away like that, I thought.

Despite that, a week later I went away with you to that sleepy dorp, and we made love. You were gentle that night, you were always gentle, but that night even more so.

I was conned into thinking this all mattered to you. It did to me. But the next morning when I looked for the tell-tale signs of blood, there were none. I hadn't bled. I had hurt as you pushed in, and you'd been afraid to go in too far, to hurt me more. It saddened me the next morning, that there was no sign to indicate what I'd done.

When I thought I spotted a drop of brown on some clothing, I told you. But you were non-committal, cold, already getting ready for the day. I lay back on the mattress, alone with my deed, my feelings. You were already gone.

'Ever since I was twelve I have wanted a girlfriend,' you told me that weekend in the Free State. 'And until I was twenty-five, nothing. Then I met Bianca, and I thought that was it. You know, I was thinking the other day that it no longer hurts? For months and months there was a pain whenever I thought of her. It has finally eased.'

I murmured encouragement.

You continued, 'But it's got to be right. I've got to be sure. I don't think I could ever love as intensely again. I don't think I could give of myself like that ever again.'

I listened to you and sighed. And later that night we made love again. And you were less cautious because now you knew how far you could go. But already you were cold, refusing to stroke me in the way others had. I took this to mean you were not attracted to me, but I did not say much. When I asked why you didn't kiss me, you tried it, but it didn't work. By daylight you did not touch me at all.

We made love a few times after that. You told me you did not love me, that you still looked at other women. I felt alone that night,

despite you being there. And I resolved that we were never going to sleep together again.

And we never did, but it wasn't the way I'd planned.

Friends ask if I was in love with you by then, and I always reply no. 'I'm very fond of you,' you told me that night when I was crying because you were so brutal with your honesty.

I had been fond of you too. But by then I was obsessed, I wanted you as I'd never wanted another human being. The sex wasn't great, as I would tell you a couple of months later, in fact it was awful, but there was something about being next to you, with you, talking to you, listening to you, that made me certain I should carry on, even if you did not bring me to orgasm, or you thought I just 'lay there'. These things could be worked through.

But there Bianca reared her head again. You remembered her all the time.

'That was one thing that was right between Bianca and me,' you commented. 'But maybe that's all it was – lust, sex, the physical.'

I couldn't answer your queries. I didn't know myself.

I could only swirl around in my own complicated emotions and hopes and watch it all drain away. I didn't know why you could not love, but that much I had now figured out.

And there was your friend Eric. The one who held me that Saturday night as I cried in his arms, him telling me you had never been attracted to me. And I believed him as I stood in the cold night, traffic shooting past us on the main road outside the bar where all three of us had come to hear music. You walked out, saw us together and said you hoped we were going to tell you what was going on.

But I believed Eric. I already thought you did not like me enough.

It was over from that moment. But we carried on limping along. Never touching, never making love. When we were forced to spend

a night in the same bed, the distance between us was wide. We didn't need to close the bedroom door that night.

4

In the end I was the one to finish it all properly and formally.

We met in another bar, one early evening. I was rushing off to the theatre after that. I had asked that you bring along all the books I had lent you, and you had then asked if I would bring along your CDs. We made the swap, ordered drinks, and I said I could not go on like this. I had to know what was happening. I was going crazy with the indecision, the lack of any real commitment.

'What's the rush?' you asked. 'My parents took ten years to get it together.'

I didn't feel like I had ten years to wait.

5

What if we had met earlier? Before Bianca, for instance. Do you think we could have made a go of it? Did you need to meet her and get hurt before you came to me and spurned what I had to offer? Perhaps we might not even have spoken if we had seen each other at that lunch? Or maybe we would have and been put off forever.

Whatever. You needed Bianca, maybe that higher self I convinced you about decreed it. You needed those fifteen months of great sex, 'spark' you called it. Arguments and passion and love-making and holidays together. You chose it.

You looked like a monk the last few times I saw you, with your hair almost shaven, wearing black cardigans with hoods that intensified the aesthetic appearance. Now Lesley tells me you're into Buddhism, and no longer eating meat.

But that's all I now know of you. That you're into a Buddhist phase, like all the phrases before it, like the time you were into astral travelling or taking helicopter lessons. I think of you, I can't help it. But we were not in love.

That was the problem, another friend of mine commented. My friends seem to be my advisors. They were also the ones who suggested I break up with you, you were tearing me apart, I was going crazy with the indecision.

You couldn't fall in love because all you saw in front of you was Bianca.

You'd lost faith in love, temporarily, and I stepped into that void.

And me? I couldn't love you either. You wouldn't let me, for a start. You thought I was desperate. Perhaps I was, perhaps not. Perhaps I glimpsed something that could have been wonderful.

But we both jumped in at the wrong time. Your patterns were swirling one way, and mine another.

At the table of the short story

Corinna

A thirteen-year-old died last week. She ate herself to death. They found her lying on the floor in front of the TV, wearing only a sheet and covered in bed bugs, faeces and bedsores. I don't even know what a bedsore looks like, some kind of suppurating red mess I suppose, oozing a clear liquid. Around her, so the magazine article says, were hamburger wrappers and take-away boxes. Her name was Corinna, and she had not left the flat for months, her brother said she hadn't even stood up in months. They measured her thighs as 137cm around and she weighed over 300 kilos. Such are the facts.

There's even a picture of her, black bouncy hair around the fat face, looking uncomfortable. The report says her mother had stopped

taking her to a nutritionist at seven, and from then on just let her daughter eat and eat and eat. The kids made fun of her in school, but despite her bulk, she had a few friends. They had their pictures in the magazine complete with quotes. The coroner said she'd died of a heart attack due to morbid obesity. Her mother just let her daughter eat herself to death. They're charging her with some sort of crime.

Her mother, Marlie, herself appears hugely overweight in the pictures taken of her being arrested, her daughter has that same face. The mother looks dull in the photos, her eyes blank and slightly malevolent. Or maybe that's just what she looks like to me because I can imagine, or I can try to, her daughter lying there on the floor, eating the fatty take-away food her mother brought her, watching TV, reading magazines.

They say she stopped going to school about six months before she died, and that's when she made the lounge into her bedroom. You have to wonder about the mother who saw her daughter getting larger and larger, yet kept feeding her those fatty meals, probably knowing what it would do to her. Not that her daughter would die, or anything, but that she'd just keep getting fatter.

It's a nightmare, the more I think about it, the more horrified and sad I get for thirteen-year-old Corinna trapped in a body too large, in a flat with only a TV for company while her mother went out to work, and her brother visited occasionally, slowly eating and eating and shitting all over herself. Why didn't her mother clean her up, at least wipe a rag over her, get rid of the shit, the smell? Who knows why she let her keep eating. Maybe Corinna had an aberrant gene that made her stuff her face and made her metabolism slow? But I can't help thinking the mother could've done something, or the brother, even the school authorities when she didn't turn up at school. But no one did anything.

And what does it feel like to be thirteen and obese and ugly? This is the time when your school friends sprout breasts, get periods and buy make-up bags, and they discover how to dress and suddenly boys are desirable, and there you are fat and thirteen and you have to wear old people's clothes because nothing fits in your age group, and it is hard to go to school and be faced with this daily, and, of course, there's all that teasing, and so one day you don't go to school. And the next and the next and the next. And soon your mother doesn't say anything. She's long since stopped caring, all she does is buy food to stock up the cupboards and bring home take-aways ...

I get up after Mom's left for work. She leaves milk and Coke on the coffee table and food near me, there's chips and chocolate and bread and meat, and I can just eat anything I like after that. 'If you make it to the kitchen, Corrie!' Mom laughs. Some days I can make it to the kitchen, and when I do I boil spaghetti, a whole pot of it. If there's no sauce, I just put butter and salt on it. I love spaghetti, I love that slimy stuff sliding down my throat, all buttery and salty, and I love the look of it, and I love the way it makes me feel.

When I was eight or nine I could still suck in my tummy and it would look sort of flat. Now of course I can't. I am fat, Mom says, but Danny – he's my brother; he works in a garage as a trainee mechanic – he says I am obese and I have a disease and Mom should take me to someone, but Mom disagrees.

She used to like to rub my tummy, then one day she bought a corset and tried to put it on me, but it was tight and it hurt and she left it. Sometimes she's nasty to me. She says I'm fat and I'll never have a boyfriend and I will be a virgin all my life and will never know what it is to have sex. Then she laughs. If her boyfriend comes over I never see her; they go into her room and fuck. I hear them, I hear the bed bouncing and I hear Mom screaming and her boyfriend grunts and I turn the TV louder and I look down at my own body under the sheet. Mom took away my clothes the other day, they

got too small, and I wasn't going out to school anymore so I didn't need them, she said.

Anyway, it's easier to wear a sheet tucked around you. I'll be thin one day, when I get older I'm going to buy some of those diet pills and things on TV.

I try not to think I'm ugly. Danny says I have my merits and my good side, and I think I do, except I eat too much. I can't stop eating, I don't know why. All I know is, when I'm sad it helps to go into the kitchen and eat, I feel okay after that. Sometimes I feel guilty. The kids at school used to say that if I ate less I'd be thinner, so yes, I know that if I didn't eat, maybe I'd be thinner. But I can't not eat. Mom's away at work and Danny's at his job and I can't read or watch TV without eating. It's fun, it fills me up. One day I will be thin, I will have a flat tummy and my breasts won't sag with all the weight. One day when I'm grown up and have a job I can get all those slimming pills and maybe have liposuction. I read about it in *Heat* the other day. And I will have sex, I will lose my virginity, because this is all just in the meantime. I can't buy the food that will make me thin or get dieting pills – Mom doesn't believe in them.

Anyway, so the day goes on. Mom comes home late, around seven or so. It's getting dark by then, she often brings take-aways. If her boyfriend's coming over she often cooks, she loves to cook and show off to him. I hate him, he's old and fat and smelly. He has a crinkled turtleneck, and once he joked that if I couldn't find a man he'd break my virginity for me. Mom and he thought it was funny, I didn't, I felt sick and I pushed my food away (this was when I was still going to school). Now he comes less, I think Mom is ashamed of everything, she does clean up sometimes, she even gave me a bath on the lounge floor once. Mouth gritted, a thin line, hair held back by butterfly clips, a cigarette smouldering in an ashtray. She turned me over, wiped my bottom, put a clean sheet over me. But she didn't like it, and since then he's left me alone. I'll go back to school next year, I've promised her that. But I don't know if she cares. When I'm older I'll get a job, I'll get those diet pills.

Alice

FEBRUARY

I count calories. That's all I do. I have a smart statistics calculator which I use to simply add, subtract, multiply and divide. From the time I get up in the morning, to the time I drink my last cup of decaf at night, I count calories. We use kilojoules in this country but I grew up counting the energy in food as calories, and it's a habit I can't break. I count everything else in the metric system, my weight of 48 kilos, my height of 1,56cms, amounts in grams, liquid in litres, but food I count in good old-fashioned calories. I have been doing it for months now.

It's control, it's success, it's fun to count the calories, to measure out food, to level off tablespoons of skim milk cottage cheese, to weigh slices of toast, to buy lean hamburgers and convert the kilojoules into calories.

It is also fun to look in the mirror and see a trimmer body, a leaner face; to step on the scale two weeks ago at 49,9 kilos, my new super-electronic scale, and then to step on it last week, to see 48,8 kilos, then 48,5 kilos. I was back at 49 today, but that didn't bug me, I'd just got my period, and so a slight weight gain is natural. The strict control is also fun, in its own way. I like knowing how much I've eaten, how much more I'm allowed. I like my life cut up strictly, neatly into ordered little squares and allotments. It gives some kind of order to the day, perhaps, I feel, to my life. I buy low-cal margarine (butter has too many calories, although it's more tasty), mozzarella cheese, cottage cheese, lean burgers, chutney, tomato sauce, salad dressing and crackers. I stopped drinking iced tea and fruit juice because I can't afford the calories.

It is fun, but it is also a game. How far can I go? How far till I'm thin? There I am at the magic below 50 kilo mark, having maintained it for a year. And now I want to go further, I want to get to 45 kilos, the weight I was at fourteen when I dieted down and liked what I saw in the mirror. My stomach was not quite flat, but beyond the magic 45 kilos seems a bit dangerous, but who knows. It is fun to lose weight, to wear a size 34 jeans, even if I don't feel thinner – my hips still feel big, stomach still curved, thighs still rounded. But perhaps it will come.

For now my head is filled with numbers, counting, subtracting, dividing, compromising, measuring, cutting, levelling off.

MARCH

My thighs are thick; I have a stomach, I step on the scale, I step off in disbelief. How can I possibly hover around the 48 kilo mark and still feel so chunky, be so chunky? I am not thin – other people are skinny at 47, 46, 45 kilos.

I've been at 48 kilos for over a month, why can't I lose more weight? Why is my body stubbornly clinging on to this fat despite my careful counting and measuring? It is not fun if I don't lose weight – it's frustrating, and yet I'm too afraid to gorge, thinking the weight will come rushing back. So I haul out the clothes I wore when I was 58 kilos. Size 36. The skirts and jeans are loose, I can fit a couple of hands in them. Yes, I have lost weight, even as I begin to doubt it as I stare at my stubbornly rounded body in the mirror: front view, side view, view from the back. Yes, my hips are smaller, my stomach is smaller, but I am still not thin as my electronic numbers wink red at me. Who is mad? The scale flashing up these figures that should signal somebody thin, or me looking despairingly into the mirror? Who is madder?

APRIL

Desperation, fear. My chest feels clutched by somebody or something. If I was older I'd say I was having a heart attack. It's like a breathlessness as I write these women's lives, weight histories and battles, and my own. Laid bare, revealed here, the intimate stuff of what we do when there's lemon meringue revolving on a cake stand in a restaurant and we must have it, life narrows to a tiny focus, a sharp point, the need is overwhelming, the battle goes on. We must have that cake although something terrible will happen: the spreading thighs, the dimpled buttocks, the stretched skin. And still we must have it, the cake that revolves, taunts, from its position on the cake stand.

Or what happens when there's chocolate in the house, biscuits, butter-flavoured popcorn, a tub of frozen yoghurt, chips, cheese, slabs of pinkly thin ham, the list is intense, endless. The food haunts us, plays games with us as we sleep, go out, socialise, have conversations about modern literature or crime or where the country's going. These things happen at the edges, our lives fixated on food, getting it, preparing it, avoiding it, counting the energy in a chocolate bar.

I feel these women crowding in around, clutching at me, desperate, fearful, hungry, starving. Over coffee we lament that we don't live in another century where our natural round womanly curves would be accepted, loved, desired. Instead we live in a century where we can work and earn our own money and buy homes to live in on our own, and can order sparkling or still mineral water, soda water or flavoured water, in flavours such as grapefruit and orange and berry, where a cappuccino can be simply decaf or decaf with low-fat milk or rich and frothy with a generous sprinkling of chocolate flakes. Such are our choices – an abundance of choice that we spurn as we go through a range of sweeteners and low-fat yoghurts till we find the one that isn't too awful.

I nibble on ice-cold papaw, dark pink, juicy chunks, light in calories. I am alone as I write, there is no man to look at my body, to tell me I look good, or that I should still lose weight, or that perhaps I should think of exercising to get rid of my thighs that stick thickly out. But that doesn't seem to matter, because it's not for anyone else, but me. I want to be thin so that I'll be perfect, so that no one can touch me and tell me I'm imperfect, no one can tease me nor touch my weakness, because there won't be any weakness.

Me/

It started soon after I married. Greg, my husband, is a tall man, although thin and slightly built. Like any tall man, like most men in fact, he eats a lot. I cook slabs of steak, hunks of roasted potatoes, oily pumpkin fritters. I buy butter. At first we both worked, and would come home and cook supper together, he ate more than me, we cooked large portions and I'd watch him wolf it all down, his body slight and slim and straight as a tree, no bends or kinks, or folds to grab onto in the middle of the night.

It was a simple marriage, we had lived together briefly, before marrying, and our lives did not change much after the wedding. I went to work, one day my surname was different, that's all, and I suddenly cut my hair and looked sophisticated, or so everyone kept telling me. Greg looked the same, as though this had all hardly made a ripple on him, our shared bed and furniture and the lamps we selected together.

When I was nearly thirty our friends started having babies. Our parents suddenly looked old and their hair thinned and they started asking about grandchildren. I was dieting, trying to lose weight, not much, just a few kilos, as we were going away over the holidays, Greg,

kind, sweet, sensitive Greg, the man I fell in love with, started staring at young women as they sashayed past in restaurants and shopping malls with bare belly buttons exposed, and thighs rich and gleaming. I saw him look, he saw me looking.

I'd stare at myself for hours in the mirror. I had cellulite, my stomach stuck out a little, there were crow's feet at the corners of my eyes, there were faint lines stretching across my forehead. It was all so silent, so hidden; yet so visible, so seen.

I remember a braai once, towards the beginning of summer, a hot spring day in Johannesburg. The men sat around the braai, chugging on beers, watching the fire burn down to a slow heat.

'Stretch marks are a real turn-off,' said one guy, his hair beginning to recede as he climbed the corporate ladder to success.

'Nah, sagging breasts,' added another man.

My husband shook his head, he did not see me standing there. 'You know, you love them,' he said, 'but sometimes you just wish they ...' His sentence was drowned out by somebody's toddler hitting his knee on the brick paving, screaming out, adults rushing to attention.

It was a hot day, they were drinking – that tends to make everyone languorous, tongues become loose. How many men love their wives, partners, girlfriends, despite what they look like? I've seen them walking around with fat women or sagging women, and yes they do love them, they say as much in bed, express as much when they put their arms around their middles. 'Thin women aren't all they're cracked up to be,' they'll say, 'I like something to grab onto.' And they do. The argument goes that it's not so much what you look like as who you are, that you provide companionship and love.

But give them a braai, beers, a hot day, a swimming pool sparkling invitingly, and the company of men while women make the salads in the cool, calm kitchen, and they will talk like this. And one day

I will come out of that kitchen to find my husband about to voice a thought, I ache to hear it, and then a child is hurt and I cannot ever ask him what it was he wanted to say one day when I was eavesdropping. I cannot ask. I will tuck it back into the corners of my mind; I will hide it.

I will become pregnant just before we go on holiday and will never lose that slight bulge that I wanted to. Instead it will grow, and my husband will continue to love me. In fact he finds my huge stomach sexy. We make love all the time when I am pregnant. The heavier I get the more creative we become in trying to have sex. I am horny all the time, but it is nothing compared to his horniness. He phones from work, and I feel desire and feeling in my vagina, that is all I am when I am pregnant, that and a belly that is round and high and hard. Mostly I simply feel my vagina nestling down there where I can no longer see it. We have sex before supper, and in the morning. I am heavy, lazy. I eat, I gain weight. It is a release, a relief. I stop work in my seventh month, I am happy to stay at home and eat. I feel like I am on another time zone, another planet. This is a world where forbidden pleasures are finally allowed: you don't have to worry about getting pregnant because you already are; you don't have to worry about getting fat and you can say coyly, in an old-fashioned tone of voice, that you're eating for two. You can have lemon meringue pie every day, not once a week, you can eat as many slices as you like. You can push food in your mouth at supper and sit slackly on the couch, your belly big, your legs spread wide open as your husband finds your mouth, his hand deep down in you, loving you, loving your bigness and everything you represent. You are going to have a baby soon: the world belongs to you.

* * *

Greg was sick in my second pregnancy, some unnamed vague illness that came and went as flu and aches and coughs, went and then returned. I nursed him the times he had to stay at home. My first-born was a toddler then, running around all day, and there was no time to sit around and get fat. I was all over the show, doing things that Greg couldn't do for me because he was sick, fetching and playing with my child. Greg did not want to make love often. He was tired. He lost weight, looked skinny for a while there. It was not a good time.

After my second child was born Greg seemed to recover. The doctor said he needed to put on weight. I had stopped working then. (That seemed to happen sometime between my pregnancies. I simply stopped, it wasn't my decision, it wasn't Greg's, the magazine I worked for was sorry to lose me.)

Soon I was pregnant again. We weren't sorry. We wanted to complete our family. Greg recovered his appetite, I had all the time in the world to try out new recipes. Greg earned a fat salary, we had time, money and leisure. I had someone to help me with the children. I bought cookery books and watched Greg eat. He filled out, looked less skinny and tubercular. I still had a middle that I could not get rid of, and now my waist was thicker after the children, but Greg said he loved me. And I believed him when he made love to me and called me beautiful. Sometimes I even ate more than I used to, filling up at supper when I cooked exotic dishes for Greg. I was not out of control, he knew that, I knew that. Occasionally I'd have to open up my jeans after supper, because I had eaten too much, but that wasn't often. Greg was amused, he would joke, say I'd get fat if I wasn't careful. I'd say he was just jealous because he'd never be able to get fat. It was a weak, corny joke, but we repeated it for years, teased each other with it. Sex was still good, if more occasional now that we had the kids and we were older and both more tired than

before. Greg was rising fast in business, we entertained often. I was the typical charming wife.

I did not miss working. I had a network of friends, and time, so much time. I was happy. I was raising my children. I had a husband who loved me, I was fairly slim. My friends were all my age. I wrote the occasional freelance article, felt like I was still keeping my hand in, so to speak. We went overseas once a year.

Greg had an affair. That's how it happened.

He had an affair and I bought a box of fudge chocolates, the two kind of happened in the same week. It was not a long affair. They had started seeing each other a few months before I found out. She was young, pretty, slim and unencumbered, a woman who had just started work at his firm. Sylvia. I was thirty-seven then; Greg was close to forty. Perhaps it was a mid-life thing for him. He promised to give her up. And he did. We saw a counsellor briefly. He asked me to forgive him. I did. We took a holiday without the kids. He said he loved me. I said I loved him. Our lives continued, I suppose that's what you say. Nothing changed really, except that I bought another box of fudge chocolates and ate it within a few days. Then I bought another, and polished that off. Then, after we came back from our holiday I went into a bakery and just ordered whatever looked good: a strawberry-covered cheesecake, golden koeksusters, pretzels covered in nuts and icing, sweet petits fours. I started to eat then. I ate and ate and ate. The need for sweetness was acute, I could not get enough. I didn't try and hide this from Greg. He saw me, night after night, eating the big meals I cooked for him, then reaching for the dessert I normally denied myself. He saw me and could not say anything after his affair.

Our old joke died. I was getting fat, as he had once said, and he was still wanting me to forgive him. I was round, then I was plump,

it happened quickly, from one year to the next. Everything exploded, the man I had loved and my security within that, my body, my control. Everything was fair game. And as I grew big I felt free. Free of the need to please Greg, free of the need to control myself, deny myself, free of my sex.

I am a fat woman now. Fat and forty. I have a husband who loves me and a beautiful home and children. He does not expect me to go back to working now that I no longer have very young children. He doesn't expect much either. Sex, food, and me there to love him. And I do, still, I still love that man who is my husband. Sometimes we talk about what I have become physically, it is no longer taboo. He never calls me fat, he never says I shouldn't eat this or that, but sometimes he asks me what I weigh now and I tell him. He purses up his mouth a little, he says, 'Mel, don't you think that's a little heavy for your height?'

'Yes,' I say sternly, 'it's far too heavy. But you love me as I am, don't you?' And of course he replies yes, and we make love, me fleshy, spreading in the bed, thighs big, stomach soft and round, and there's no difference really. I am bigger than him, that's all. Soon I will weigh more than my tall, slim husband and he will sit with a beer in his hand at a braai, and he will not say anything about sagging breasts or stretch marks or big, fat women.

How could he? His friends would laugh, would think of me in the kitchen in my loose trousers and over-sized T-shirts. Now he would not sound convincing.

I am off to eat till I burst: there are big fat sweet potatoes bubbling in pineapple juices, there is meat, spinach, ice-cream, chocolate sauce, I will eat till I feel I can't breathe and will sit there, slack, big, as though I am pregnant, watching the man who is my husband watching me.

I've done it now.

Voices

My friend with the curly blonde hair – her name is Anne – has thick arms and wants to be thinner. She talks of her time overseas, living in London, when she ate and grew big. I cannot imagine this, this slender woman, kissing her cat, eating healthily, discussing breakfast with me when I mention what tomorrow's menu will bring. She says she is working on her emotions, trying to control her eating, her bingeing. She is trying to work out what food means to her, is trying to control food, instead of letting it control her. She goes to a weekly support group, she is winning, she says, even though she is not yet losing the weight she wants to.

My friend, Meg, who dieted and was only thin because her mother compared herself to Meg, saying she could fit into a size 34 when she'd been her age. When her mother died Meg started eating, enjoying fair-sized meals, filling up on thick stuff like potatoes, pies, putting on weight. She visits me, turns sideways in the mirror when I complain about my weight. 'Look at my stomach,' she says, happy as she points out her new rounded curves. I remember her when her arms were skinny and she always skipped supper. She is happy now, freed from having to be thin for a mother who criticised. I watch her, the reckless abandon, the enjoyment she takes from really eating now, after years of denying herself.

Then there are others, who eat too much, or too little, who fear being fat, who fear being sick or anorexic, or who cannot get love and gorge on food, finding that chocolate sometimes replaces men's arms, warm bodies; others who are loved and fat and sexy and happy. Yes, it does happen. And others who are loved, but can never feel loved, despite all evidence to the contrary and so continue eating.

The list goes on, it is endless. The battle lines are clearly marked in this modern world.

And there is even a male friend, skinny, tall, underweight. He has been to nutritionists for body-building milkshakes, he has joined a gym, he has lamented his hollowed-in chest and stick arms while saying, in the same breath, that he wants to be loved for who and what he is. So he does not find time to drink his milkshakes or build his muscles. And yes, he has a girlfriend, although it is a superficial affair. Perhaps when it ends he will start again on his quest to gain weight.

'I hate my thick thighs, no matter how much I diet or exercise I can't get rid of them. I have big hips too, I suppose I have to admit that to myself. I always thought if I got thin enough I'd have small hips. Now look, my stomach's nearly flat, and I have these wide child-bearing hips.'

'Do you think my shoulders are too big? Why do I want small narrow shoulders? Because they're delicate, feminine, you look thinner then ...'

'I hate my knees. No matter how thin I am there's still wobbly bits around them. They stick out, I want model knees.'

'I have model knees! They're straight when you look sideways, and slim. It's the only thing about my body I'm happy about!'

'Don't complain! Do you have two vertical scars on your knees? I had an operation when I was fourteen, because one leg was growing longer than the other one, and now when I wear stockings people always say there's a run in them.'

'I'm going in for my breast reduction tomorrow morning! I'm so excited, I'm so scared, are you sure it won't be sore, Alice?'

'I promise you, Anne, it's the best thing I ever did. You have scars afterwards, but it's worth it just to have small perky breasts, besides the scars fade afterwards to almost nothing. It all depends on the type of skin you have, of course.'

'I'm so afraid a man won't love me unconditionally. What happens

after, you know, and I open up my shirt and say, look here's the operation!'

'Do men mind cellulite and stretch marks?'

'Just keep the lights low.'

'He should love you for yourself.'

'Thank God I'm out of all that. Not having to worry about getting pregnant is only one of the many advantages to being in a gay relationship. Me? I want to lose around four or so kilos, just around my tummy.'

'I've got scars and all that, and yes, I'm fat, I admit it, but my boyfriend loves me for me. He's said so, I've even lost a little weight, you know, I'm swimming every morning and gyming too.'

They are all here, the ghosts, the presences, breathing down my neck, all shapes and sizes drifting in and out as I write this, as large as pears, as round as pizzas, anaemic-looking as carrots, bursting like cherries. Worried women, anxious women, animated women: here at the table of the short story.

Ten minutes to hate

I am sitting in a darkened theatre beside the man I hope will love me one day. We are listening to the words of the American writer, Annie Dillard, as interpreted by a South African actress in a pseudo American accent.

She is talking of the life of a weasel, whose only battle is for survival. 'I would like to be a weasel,' she says, 'with my mind blank and full of nothing. I would like to know what that feels like, no present or past, the minute forgotten as soon as it is past.'

In the interval we talk. We have listened spellbound, enthralled, captured by what the actress is doing to the words, and then, subsequently, captured by the words themselves.

We drink sweet soft drinks on this cold winter night. I swirl the ice around in mine, crunching ice against my teeth. Thomas, the man

I am with, prefers his drinks with no ice because the cubes hurt his teeth. He swallows his lukewarm soda water and I watch him. We are with another couple, Jane and Allen. Jane I know from a course I did years ago, and Allen is a man she met at an exhibition a few weeks ago.

We go into the second half. We think about where we will go after the show, we think about tomorrow, Saturday morning, getting up late.

The second half stuns us. It is all about an eclipse somewhere over central America. The narrator makes the scene come alive: we see the blue shrouded mountains, the blackness covering the land, the sudden brightness. But, it is much more than an eclipse. It is soaring beauty, fantastical, another world. We sit still for close on an hour, wrapped up in the drama.

There is tremendous applause at the end. We clap and clap, the actress bows, we give her a standing ovation, and she smiles again. We are going to stand up soon, leave the theatre, warm with the knowledge of what this actress has brought us.

Then there is a bang. Gunshots. The audience screams. The actress stops smiling, the lights in the auditorium are still off and there is only a single spotlight on her. There's a blast of cold air as a group of gunmen burst in. I hold on tight to Thomas, I scream.

The leader of the group raises his revolver, fires shots at the ceiling.

'Shut up!' he yells. 'Everybody shut up. Shut up or we'll shoot.' Now we are silent. I grip Thomas's arm, making bruises for the following morning.

The gunmen have balaclavas over their heads so that we cannot see their faces. There are six or eight of them. The leader climbs onto the stage, while a sidekick grips the actresses' arm and holds her. We see her frightened face, stripped of artifice or pretence.

‘We want whatever you have,’ the gunman yells. ‘We want money, jewellery. Give it or we’ll shoot.’

Like children collecting candy, the gunmen make their way up and down the aisles, women thrust their bags at them, the gangsters throw out the debris, ripping into their purses. The men proffer wallets. No one refuses.

I look at Thomas, his eyes are as scared and wide as mine are. I am wearing my grandmother’s gold watch.

I show it to him. ‘What shall I do?’ I whisper.

‘Give it!’ he hisses back. I want to take it off, hide it, but one of the gunmen is there already. Thomas gives him his wallet. I show him my bag. He rifles through both, taking out the crisp clean notes withdrawn from the ATM for the weekend ahead. The man’s brown eyes bore into mine from behind the balaclava. The rifle hangs perilously at his side, swinging ominously. He leans against my face till I am looking into the dark, eyes inches away from mine. He is so close I can smell his breath.

‘Do you want to die?’

I shake my head nervously.

‘Then why you don’t give me that gold watch?’

I look at it. Drawn back up to his full height, he looks down at it. Thomas nudges me.

‘It was my grandmother’s.’

‘Your grandmother’s?’ He turns to the audience who are watching this spectacle of my refusal to give up parts of memory.

He brings his face up to mine again. I smell that breath, a remnant of onions eaten sometime tonight. Am I mad? I’m taking on a gunman over a watch that belonged to a grandmother I hardly cared for. Do I want to die?

Eyes piercing into mine, the man roars, ‘My grandmother died working for you! My grandmother died because she was always

working. My grandmother had no gold watch!' I jump with the force of his anger. He leans closer. I feel his hot breath against my ear, and he yells, 'Do you want to die tonight?'

I take the watch off, hands shaking. I do not want to die. I want to wake up tomorrow morning, this whole thing distant, forgotten. I give him the watch. It is a modern day peace offering. My life for my dead grandmother's gold watch.

He takes it, sneering through the black-knitted balaclava. Then he presses his fingers into the veins in my arms. I wince, knowing I mustn't say anything to provoke him. As it is, I made a mistake by drawing attention to myself. In situations like these, we know to comply, shut-up and comply.

The robbery continues. There are no further hitches. The gunmen take money, and sparse bits of jewellery: wedding rings, some necklaces, bracelets.

It's over. All in all it took ten minutes, and they are gone, leaving a set of bullet holes in the ceiling, as a reminder, as a warning of hate. Security guards are swarming all over the place, people are sobbing or getting up in outrage, yelling, 'Shit!' and 'Jesus!' and 'Fucking bastards!'

The police have been called. Upstairs, in the main theatre, a musical goes on; it is a loud raucous celebration of Africa. No one up there heard the gunshots, and miraculously the bullets lodged in the ceiling beneath the main auditorium, not one went through. No one has been hurt.

We rush out into the foyer. The bar is deserted; the bartenders were locked up in a cupboard so that they could not get help. A tiny glass door leads off into the street and they show us where the robbers came in.

We mill around, we shake our heads in shock, pointing to that small glass door, commenting that security should be tighter. The manager

gives us drinks to calm our nerves. A woman stands vomiting in the corner, a man holds her.

We are asked to stay, so that we can give our statements to the police.

‘Why would they target theatre-goers?’ a woman asks. No one answers. Then, ‘We’re easy targets,’ a fat man laughs in reply. ‘Sitting ducks, watching a play.’

‘It’s disgusting,’ the woman emphasises.

Thomas is in the toilet. I sit on one of the couches, holding a mug of lukewarm coffee. Jane holds onto Allen. I feel alone and cold, shivering in a skimpy dress. My coat is dangling over a seat in the theatre. I sit immobilised.

The police are late. It’s nearly a half an hour since the incident. A few officers arrive. They take our statements, noting precisely and deliberately what was taken, slowly writing down the details on their official forms. The one assigned to Thomas and I is young, he looks barely out of high school. When he reads back the statement, the grammar is twisted and confused, but the basic message is there.

‘At least no one was hurt,’ we reassure ourselves.

The fat man cracks a joke, normality is returning. ‘Only in South Africa are you considered lucky to get away with your life when you get robbed!’ Some of us laugh.

The police want us to stay put, dealing with us all. A few reporters arrive, thrust out from a quiet night shift. They take our stories; this will be big. As part of the crime wave cresting the country, a group of theatre-goers is robbed. Is there no place sacred, no place safe in this land of ours? I can see the headlines already.

Security will be beefed up, the manager assures us.

We talk in groups, we hover, we pace. How could this have happened? The country’s gone mad.

‘I’m convinced it’s never going to stop,’ Jane says.

Allen shakes his head, 'It has to. I grew up in Zambia. After independence the crime was so bad it was just like here, we saw no future, but it did stop, eventually. It took about ten, fifteen years, but eventually it did stop.'

'I'm not prepared to wait that long,' Jane says. 'I've had enough. I'm getting out. Nowhere is safe. It's not worth it. Why should I have to face this every day just because the country's sorting itself out, and the government doesn't give a damn. No way. I'm getting out of here. First thing Monday morning, I'm phoning the Canadian Embassy, the Australian Embassy, whatever. I'm going.'

No one tries to argue her out of it. We all have our escape routes in our heads. Foreign passports. Working in London. There is nothing left to say.

'Crime's getting worse all over the world,' Allen shrugs out his weak argument. 'When I was in London a few months ago, I could see it wasn't as safe as five, ten years ago. You're not safe anywhere.'

'But it's still not like here!' exclaims Jane.

'Perhaps it's all part of the turning of the century thing,' I add. 'Everybody's going mad all over the world.'

But they simply look at me. Thomas looks far away. He does not hold me as Allen holds Jane.

It is near twelve before we are allowed to leave. Thomas drops me off at my flat. I ask him if he'll stay the night. But he has to get up early; he has to train. He is running a marathon in a month. 'I don't want to be alone tonight,' I plead.

'I'm sorry, Greta,' he says. 'Phone me if you need to, okay? That marathon's important to me. Lock your doors. You'll be fine. You've got burglar bars, the best alarm system.'

'I'm not afraid of anyone getting in,' I say, 'I'm afraid of my memories. I just need you here tonight.'

'And then it'll be tomorrow night and the next. You've got to get

over this by yourself. You can't use me as a crutch.'

'I had a gunman breathing down my throat tonight, and you tell me I need you as a crutch!'

He leaves in his smart red car. I hear it roar down the quiet road. I go to bed. I am surprisingly calm. I will sleep. It's how I know it's finally over: when the man I thought would love me leaves in the middle of the night so that he can train for some marathon.

Thomas does not like to argue, hates ugly confrontations, he even told me so one night. I should have known. I could hold onto him if I could only keep quiet, make do with this little bit I get from him. But I can't. I won't.

The papers are full of the story. It's a national disgrace. On the radio bulletins politicians are being quoted.

'When innocent people can't even go to the theatre anymore, then it's time to stop pussy-footing and start dealing with the crime problem,' says a parliamentary minister.

'It is a tragedy,' says another, 'but we must remember theatre is an elitist culture.' He seems to suggest we stop going to the theatre so that this sort of thing does not happen. I can only laugh. No other response seems appropriate.

I spend the day by myself. On Sunday my parents call from the coast where they are holidaying. They have heard about the incident. They are shocked when I say I was involved.

In the afternoon my married sister comes over with cake and children. But I'm fine. I tell her that much, and she asks why I didn't call, why she had to hear it from our parents.

'I suppose I thought Thomas would be around,' I tell her. I haven't heard from him all weekend.

'Are you still hoping against hope?'

'Still am!' I smile.

She doesn't say anything to this.

She leaves, wanting me to spend the night at her house. But I am safe here. I am in this cocoon where I do not feel or think about what has happened.

I am sent for counselling to deal with my trauma.

But as I tell the psychologist talking to me, I feel fine. I do not have visions of the event. I am not at all affected. I carry on living my life normally. I refuse to be scared and overly cautious.

The psychologist leans forward when I tell her this, concern on her face. 'Greta,' she says, her hands a pyramid beneath her chin, 'you must deal with the trauma of the event. You were robbed. And this is not an isolated incident, it is happening all around you. You must take precautions, you have to be careful.'

I let the advice hang in the air. She goes on, 'You must deal with the fact that you looked death in the face.'

I want to laugh at her melodrama.

The words fly over me, because suddenly I no longer care. The sunlight streams in, hurting my eyes. I cry, and the floodgates open. I can hardly talk; barely explain to her that I am crying because I haven't seen Thomas since the incident, how we have only talked perfunctorily on the phone. He does not want to see me, he needs to sort through his confusion.

But I am sobbing so much the psychologist does not know this. I cannot get the words out. The robbery seems unimportant. I am invincible against everything except the hurt this man has caused.

But the psychologist does not know this, thinking I am crying about what has happened to me at the theatre. I cannot sob out the awful cliché that it is because I have a sour relationship with a man who has never loved me.

At home I wonder why it is that this incident does not, cannot

touch me. Why I am not scared by it. Let them get me, I think. Just let them get me. It is as if nothing can hurt me anymore. Others react to the violence that is screwing our land into something hard and unbelievable, planning to leave while fortressing their houses till the immigration papers come through, but I refuse.

I can see and smell the violence when I drive around the city.

The fear is ever present. It is there in the furtive glances of scared people in their cars, the revving of engines at traffic lights when they are red, and the anger of those who weren't near enough to run the orange, and sit waiting at a red robot, fingers drumming on the wheel, eyes scanning the rear-view mirrors, checking that no one is about to smash a brick through the window or point a gun at them.

The fear lurks behind the high walls and the electrified gates and the panic buttons that we wear when we go outside to hang washing. It is present in conversation at dinner parties, and it is there on the radio news every morning that we wake up.

A father shot dead in his driveway by hijackers while his ten-year-old watches him bleed to death. A woman is tortured in her home because she has no money. The robbers brand her for life by pressing a hot iron against her face. A temporary remembrance wall is painted over with faces and names of the victims of crime, I drive past it daily before it is made white again.

You cannot turn in this city without wondering when it will be your turn.

Well, it was my turn.

You cope. You go to braais and sit listening when a woman describes her hijacking. You stare, absorbed by her story, although it is nothing new.

You are fascinated by what you perceive as her bravery, her courage, her decision to remain in the country. You do not realise it is only her

way of coping, that there is no other alternative for her.

As there is no alternative for me. There is no alternative to the hope and the panic except to face up to it, stare at it in the face, stare it down, as brutal thugs breathe on you, wanting whatever it is you've got. If you let it stalk you, it will hunt you down.

You can't fear dying when the next bullet might be for you.

Cul-de-sacs

Four people are bumping along a dusty road to a farm.

The landscape is dry, trees cling to rocks, the sky swirls with clouds. It's boiling here, even though it's the start of autumn, near this farm in the north western part of the country. It is sometime toward the end of the century, a new millennium ahead. The farm belongs to the parents of the man driving the car. His name is Jake, and he has wispy strawberry blond hair that stands out in this landscape of bush and thorn. He has been here often, taking holidays here as a child, when his parents would bring his large brood of brothers and sisters and leave them with their grandparents over the long school breaks. He has come less frequently since leaving school. The army, university and a job have all prevented him from returning as often as he'd like.

Next to him sits Anna: small, dark-haired, petite, twisted into her seat, staring at the familiar landscape of this farm, although she has seen it only once before. She too has a job back in the city that prevents her from going away too often. Besides, there is often the question of money, lack of money, or more important things to spend it on – a car service, new tyres, clothes for her job in the city. The contrast between her black hair and Jake's high, near-orange colour is startling, seen from the back seat.

Danielle and Ian sit snug at the back. They have been lovers for two years, but that will change soon. Neither knows it for sure, but it is hard to erase doubts and to ignore a growing fear that something is about to become undone. They know this as they sit in the back, holding hands, smiling at each other as Jake steers along the dirt road.

The farmhouse is white and plain, sitting within an attempt at an English country garden. It is a sharp contrast to the dry, thorny landscape that surrounds it. An iron roof traps the heat; a rough concrete floor makes the house cool again.

* * *

They kick up brown earth as they walk along the rutted track to the river. It is the second day of their Easter holiday. They charge along the track with lunch in a picnic basket; rifles slung across Jake and Ian's shoulders.

'For snakes,' Jake had said as he got them out the safe. 'Also, they say there are leopards in the hills, although I've only seen them once.'

'What else can we expect?' asks Anna.

'Not much, it's just for in case,' says Jake. 'The animals will smell us and run off long before we even see them, but you never know. If we see any living thing today we'll be lucky.'

‘Have you ever shot anything on the farm?’ Ian asks, examining the shotgun.

‘Ag, ja. Kudu mainly. For biltong and roasts. But we shoot so rarely that there’s plenty buck left.’

So they stride. Ian and Jake in front, scanning the bush, heaving rifles across their chests.

‘Armed white males,’ laughs Danielle.

‘Armed, but not so dangerous!’ laughs Ian, as he slips Danielle into the crook of his arm.

Anna and Jake look benignly on. Later, Anna and Danielle will stand holding the guns as Ian takes their picture. The photo will wither and yellow as Anna’s slight frame droops from the weight of the rifle, and Danielle’s rifle dangles close to her feet. They smile in the sunshine. As they sweat under the fierce sun, the flies brush past, tickling Anna’s nose just as the shutter clicks, leaving her with a permanently disdainful expression as the photo withers.

They encounter little that is dangerous along the way. A puff adder suns itself in the path, but Ian and Jake scan the route and their training in the army comes to the fore before anyone can step on the snake. It slithers stealthily away, and they watch its sleek yellow and gold body as it slides off into the yellow grass.

* * *

They sit on a rock, idly flicking bits of bread and avocado into the river. The air is still. Occasionally a bird calls or fruit flies buzz past, attracted by sweat. There’s a low insistent hum of flies, beetles and the wind as it ruffles the veld.

They eat the packed sandwiches and drink mineral water. Anna’s black hair traps midnight as she sits in this harsh light that bleaches all colours white. She eats an apple and complains of being too full

from breakfast for anything else. The light filters through Jake's fuzz, picking out glints and highlights.

They are talking about emigration and about the violence that is making them think twice about staying in this country they were born in. They are talking about the need to save enough money to make a new life somewhere else. And they are talking about how difficult that is, with the rand ailing fast against overseas currencies. This last week Anna waved goodbye to a best friend who was setting out for London after her recent graduation. Another friend has found a job in New York and is leaving soon. Anna wonders when it will be her turn. She also wonders whether there is a strange pull that Africa exerts, sucking you into its problems, its heat, its fierce divisions and extremes – something that can only be resisted when your life grows so bitter or unhappy that the only solution seems to be to get out. Wrench yourself away, find a new life.

Anna does not doubt that she too will leave one day. She cannot see herself getting old in this country of extremes, but hasn't yet found the courage (or the money) to leave. The ties are there: family, pets, friends, the fear of starting all over again; but this country binds you to it with its heavy sense of trying to make do. There's the fear of a car hijacking at the manual gate, a gun thrust up your mouth, the threat of being raped in a field, hearing cars whizz by – it is all too strong.

Ian looks out at this landscape of dry contours and thorn trees. Danielle lies across his lap, her dark hair spilling out over his legs which have been scratched by thorns and insects. When they break up, as they both know they must, he will leave this country. He will join his mother in New Zealand, the country to which she has returned now that she is divorced. He will find a job, a life, a new girlfriend, a wife. South Africa will fade into a memory of his past.

Right now, he looks at Danielle, and tries to imagine a life for them together. She does not want to leave. Her entire family is here. Ian has tried to persuade her, but she refuses. She cannot let herself believe that this fledgling new country will not come right. For her, there is no choice.

She works for a welfare organisation, one of the many that have mushroomed since the new government came to power. She is a social worker who helps broken families to mend. It is the reason she goes out dancing and drinking most weekends. It is a way of forgetting; it is a way of letting go of the weight of her job with its stench of poverty and hopelessness that carries the destitute into the office where she works. And this is part of the reason Ian loves her.

Jake remembers running through landscape like this when he was defending South Africa from terrorists in Angola. It made his skin crinkle into the tight lines around his eyes, and gave him a sense of fearlessness that sometimes makes him do incredibly stupid things now.

Born of an Afrikaans mother and an English-speaking father, Jake has always felt his life has been neatly split in two. He speaks English with a slightly hard edge to it, the more guttural tones of his mother's language spilling out into his English.

From as long as he could remember, his family has been partitioned off into these two sides of the family. One year Christmas was spent with the Afrikaans side of the family, the next it was spent with the English side of the family. Even the food differed: a hot roast, sweet vegetables and a steaming fruit pudding on the Afrikaans side; light salads and moulds with the English family.

It was actually a relief to be in the army, among mainly Afrikaans recruits. The English-speakers were separated from each other, isolated among huge groups of Afrikaners who forced them to adapt

or suffer. Jake had begun to feel Afrikaans at last. When the sun beat down on training sessions and tough-looking corporals spoke of the need to defend the people back home and the threat of terrorists up north, Jake began to feel as though he belonged in a way that had never seemed possible at home. He could forget the English side and revel in the low guttural sounds of Afrikaans that clipped his words neatly in two. He did not have to worry that somebody wouldn't understand: in a training camp outside Bloemfontein in the flat Free State field, everybody understood.

No one had told them, but somehow they knew they were going to Angola to fight in the war as their tanks moved further and further north, skirting the border.

Jake has told all this to Anna, has tried to explain why he didn't get out of the army, dodge the call-up papers, go overseas. But he has seen by her angry look that she does not understand, and still condemns him for his small part in propping up the government, the war, apartheid.

'If I'd been male, there's no way I would've gone to the army,' she has said to him. 'I would have left, gone overseas. Done something. No country could make me fight for them.'

Sitting on the massive rocks, with the heat making their words slow, the topic comes up again. Jake and Ian try to explain why they do not regret their time in the army.

Ian says, 'Young guys today, who don't have to go into the army, you can see they haven't been. They're immature, they've got no sense of responsibility. They haven't had toughening up. The army teaches you to rely on yourself. It teaches you a whole lot of crap, like that some of those guys are real arseholes, and wouldn't stand a chance in the outside world. But you've got to laugh at that, man. It doesn't matter. It teaches you not to give a damn about anything, that nothing really matters.'

'You know what I enjoyed about the army?' Jake asks. 'That feeling of togetherness. You're all in this together, and you've got to learn to rely on each other. Because when it's only you and those guys in miles of miles of bush, that's it. If you don't know how to look after each other, if you don't stick together, that's it.'

'But how could you willingly go fight for the government?' Anna persists, asking Ian and Jake together.

'Well, to be honest, I didn't fight,' Ian admits. 'After basic training I joined the police and spent my time opening and closing booms at the airport. Jake saw all the action.'

'You forget I'm Afrikaans, Anna,' says Jake.

'Only partly.'

'Enough so. We were told we were fighting for the people back home. They needed protection.'

'It was brainwashing. Couldn't you see through it?'

'No. I couldn't. I didn't have to. They'd given us a purpose, a reason to go out and moer those Angolans. We wanted to. Then we got there, and it was just days and days of heat. Sitting underneath those ratels, the flies sucking off your sweat, trying not to be too bored. Trying not to make too much noise or we'd be discovered. But by then it was too late for idealism. You just had to go ahead, or you'd die. There was no choice.'

Jake looks at Anna, sitting self-absorbed and self-contained on her rock. It is easy for her to make judgements. She has never been tested to the limit, has never had to make a life and death decision. That might change when she gets older, and decisions and choices are thrown in front of her like land mines. It might not. That's the beauty of being born female, Jake thinks, the choices that are taken away, and the choices that are never presented. Anna wouldn't see it like that. Jake does not bring it up. He wonders if she will settle and marry, perhaps have children. Or perhaps she will move away, will

find whatever excitement or peace she is looking for overseas. It is a nagging desire that makes her want to leave, something he cannot relate to. He's never even been overseas. He'd like to go one day, but for now is content.

* * *

Bugs glide over Anna's feet dangling in the warm green water of the round dam built to catch the overflow of the reservoir. Brown scum clings to her calves flung over the dam wall, backside resting on the narrow curved shelf of the round enclosure. Leaves swirl among the debris, the heat creates a glaze over the faraway brown and green hills. You cannot see to the bottom of this shallow dam.

'It's probably cleaner and healthier than your average chlorinated swimming pool,' Jake remarks as he plunges in naked.

'Probably,' says Anna, looking away as he swims, embarrassed by the sight of the penis she once let inside her. She stares at the mountains, at the rough koppie behind, and the gnarled trees and plants in this dry landscape. When he is in and swimming and she can no longer see anything of vital importance, she looks again as Jake swims round and round, splashing her in T-shirt and rolled-up jeans. When he gets out, she again turns away, and he asks her why. It's not like she hasn't seen him like this before.

Anna finds it hard to explain that she doesn't want to see it this time, that it embarrasses her because their time of sleeping together is over. She doesn't want to be reminded of it, considers it a weakness that they even did it together. She turns away from this friend with the red hair and the grinning face turned toward her, his penis dangling stupidly like a toy wanting to be played with.

Anna ended the sex they had months ago. Something was clearly not working. She announced it portentously, quietly, with full explanations. Jake had shrugged his shoulders. It had been a business-like decision to

sleep with Jake while they were both between lovers and passions.

She'd slipped once though, the night of a party, with too much ouzo swimming around in her. But that was it. She'd wondered for sometime after that if she might be pregnant, despite the pill, despite the regular if scanty appearance of her period every month. She had heard cases of women being pregnant, yet continuing to have mild bleeds. She watched the bulge of her stomach anxiously, but it grew no bigger, and her waist remained defined, not thickening as it would if she was pregnant. She didn't want children, but still it might be nice to know if she could get pregnant, if she was fertile. Maybe she couldn't even conceive.

She kicks her feet around in the water while Jake dresses behind her, and she wonders idly if sperm can penetrate the soles of your feet and travel up your legs right into you.

* * *

Ian's face is tense above Danielle's as he pushes through her reluctance and the heat and the sheer impact of what both know is going to happen. He doesn't look her in the eye as he flops heavily over her on the single bed. Sweat runs off their bodies.

The farmhouse is silent. Jake and Anna have gone off to swim. The fly screens keep the flies out, and no animals move in the late afternoon heat. The crackle of hooves on the cinder-like veld will come later when the cattle are herded back into their kraal.

Danielle gets up and lies on the other bed. Ian looks across at her. He puts his clothes back on as he goes in search of bottled water from the fridge. Danielle joins him soon after, drinking loud, angry gulps as they wait for Jake and Anna to come back. They sit in the lounge, all odd wooden chairs and a long mattress that serves as an extra bed. They read old *National Geographics* laid on the coffee table.

They flip through them, past ice-packed lands and green meadows, so different from this brown, scorched continent. The house seems silent without Anna and Jake, both intense people who seem to exude tremendous noise and talk when they are around.

Danielle and Ian have noticed the currents of irritation between their host and his friend, Anna. 'Don't you wonder what's going on between Jake and Anna?' Danielle asks.

'I suppose so. There's a lot of friction in the air.'

'Do you think they're sleeping together?'

'Anna and Jake? No ways. Not those two.'

'Why not?'

'Well, for a start, she's not in love with him, and Anna would never sleep with somebody she doesn't love. She wouldn't sleep with Jake out of desperation. Trust me on this. I worked with her. I know her.'

'You haven't seen her in nearly a year.'

'People don't change.'

'I think they do,' Danielle says. 'There has to be some reason they're rubbing up against each other. Did you see when Jake flicked his banana skin into the river? Did you see that look of intense fear or disgust or loathing or something? It wasn't a friendship look. It was almost hate.'

The screen door is flung open. Jake and Anna arrive wet, burnt a little by the sun, making loud noises about who is going to do what for supper.

* * *

The fire crackles down low, the smell of spices and meat hangs in the air. A half-finished bottle of red wine lies on the concrete outdoor table, it is joined by crushed empty beer cans. The moon shines brightly from the sky, a full moon that lights up the eerie evening. There is silence but for the static sounds of a battery-powered radio

being played in the distance in one of the farm worker's huts.

They have hung a few kerosene lamps to light the way to the steps of the farmhouse. They watch as a satellite, which looks like a star, makes a dazzling fast circle around the earth. Jackals yowl in the distance. Occasionally they hear a bakkie growling along the sand road. Ian's breath comes out in beer flames, Jake's smells of sour grapes, Danielle clutches her cider. It is their last night on the farm. Tomorrow is Easter Sunday, and they will leave.

They wonder when and if they will return. They have thoughts they do not want to question or probe. Feelings that remain nameless. Anna thinks she will return here once more only. Something will happen, perhaps she will no longer see Jake, or life will catch up with them. Out loud, Ian asks Jake if he can return, and Jake says anytime. Danielle is half-asleep in her fold-up chair.

Jake remembers similar evenings on the farm, with his family and other friends. There's a warm glow as he remembers the people he has brought up here, the nights of talking around the hissing fire. It is what farm life is all about. The nights spent braaing meat, eating it in the darkness. The smell of beer, burnt flesh and the aroma of smoke from the logs. It is a sweet, nostalgic fragrance that clings and comes back in the creases of clothes when returning to the city.

For now, it is night at the start of autumn. They will go into winter. Anna will grow to intensely dislike her new job, and will find another one. Ian and Danielle will break up. Jake will approach his thirtieth birthday and wonder why it is he can't find a passion in his life, something to fire him up, obsess him. Life is passing, seemingly meaninglessly.

Tonight they talk. They catch the occasional music from the kraals, and Ian taps into their collective anger and fear when he listens to music in an African language, drifting up the road to their farmhouse and he says, 'Tell me, what are the blacks good for anyway? It's only

the primitive stuff. Dancing, athletics, having babies!’ Anna and Jake murmur uneasily. It is not good to agree to racism, they know that. They grew up under apartheid and emergency laws, and the dying years of the Nationalist government. Now they live under a black government that both agree is necessary and just, but doubts are creeping in.

Anna attended a liberal university. She stood on the sidelines of the few protest marches still streaming across campuses on her first year. For a while Anna even took to calling South Africa Azania and sending letters overseas with Azania written on them instead of South Africa. What had changed? Why was she listening to Ian, and agreeing with what he said, in spite of herself? When did that huge divide come about? At university she had not foreseen a time when she would have only white friends, as she does now.

Jake nods. Ian is expressing what they all feel now – the impotence at the increasing corruption that has swept the new government, the civil service, the postal system, everywhere you look. And somehow, because of all this, it is becoming acceptable to become racist. Despite the promises of a new country, freedom, a rainbow nation – all those buzz words – apartheid still lingers, the races don’t mix. Even more so now, because resentment taints their views: resentment at the new crop of educated blacks who speak with an accent, come from the same universities and whose mistakes in the language or the job are overlooked because they’ve been oppressed, or haven’t had the same opportunities. It’s bullshit, thinks Anna, it’s what’s going to drive me out of here.

‘It’s not that they shouldn’t be given opportunities,’ she says to Ian and Jake and the almost-asleep Danielle, ‘but why must I be denied opportunities because I’m white? They’re going to chase me out of here. Maybe that’s what they want. For us to get the hell out of here, and then they’ve got the country to themselves.’

‘And what are they going to do without all the whites and their skills?’ Ian asks.

‘And where am I going to go?’ asks Jake. ‘My family is here, they’ve been here for hundreds of years.’

‘What I object to the fact that I don’t have a national anthem in my own language,’ adds Anna. ‘I refused to sing *Die Stem* at school. How the hell am I supposed to feel South African when I don’t even have an anthem in English?’

The question mark hangs in the air.

‘I want to live in a country where I don’t have to even know what or who the president is!’ Anna continues indignantly. ‘Like Sweden or somewhere else in Scandinavia. Where apparently the prime minister changes every year and travels on the bus along with everybody else.’

‘You’re not going to get that in Africal!’ laughs Jake. ‘Anywhere in Africa. It’s a continent of heat and blazing tempers and wars and revolutions.’

‘Then I’m going to Norway. Or Iceland. Where it’s cold, and nothing much matters.’ Anna mutters, her usual response. She has had this discussion before, with others.

They laugh.

‘It’s got to get better,’ says Jake hopefully. ‘Crime’s got to go down.’

‘I think,’ Ian announces, ‘that we’ve just got to accept that if we’re going to stay here, that we’re living in a third world country now. We hovered somewhere between the two extremes for years and now we must just accept it, and then we’ll be happy.’

‘Ja, with books being taxed till you can’t afford them, and ministers bribing each other and everybody else, and people killing you for your car, and standards and services going down ...’ Anna concludes.

They sit in the grim silence that follows her bitter remarks. The

country has made racists of them all, as Ian points out now.

‘English white liberals, they’re not so liberal anymore,’ he says. ‘Listen to them. They’re as racist as any old Afrikaner, more so, because they have to pretend not to be.’

Anna recalls arguing with Indian friends a year after leaving university. She’d complained about the affirmative action she’d encountered while looking for a job. ‘You’ve got to pay for your privileges,’ they said unsympathetically.

‘No, I don’t!’ she’d argued back. ‘I wasn’t old enough to vote then. By the time I was old enough to vote, I was saying ‘yes’ in a referendum to give power to the blacks!’

You’ve got to pay, was all they kept repeating, and No, I don’t! had reverberated round and round their argument till they’d given it up.

She wonders now what had happened to those friends – casualties of the years after university, part of the friendships that had shrivelled.

‘Are you staying, Ian?’ Anna asks.

‘I don’t know. I want to go to New Zealand, visit my mom there, see if I like the place. My sister and her boyfriend are already there. I don’t know, Anna, I don’t see the country going anywhere fast, and I am not going to sink with it. Now if I can only get Danielle to come with ...’ he says, running a hand along her cheek.

Danielle groans, grimaces, turns away, going back into her half sleep. ‘Danielle thinks there’s a future here, and all her family’s here, but I’ve only got my father here now, and his girlfriend.’

There is no need to ask Jake, the Jake who had never gone overseas, and doesn’t understand what all the fuss about a grand, mythical overseas is about. The Jake who fought for the country that his friends are considering leaving, the country he’d almost died for. Decisions are cut and dried for Jake on this score. Anna envies him the fact that he doesn’t have to decide.

The night is around them, the dense shapes of trees stand stark against the moonlit sky. Plans stretch ahead, a year at a time, no further than that.

The debate dies down. They speak about Easter Sunday, and discuss religion. Jake's belief in Christianity against the disbelief of Anna and Ian who have refused religion, and Danielle who's been brought up Jewish, but no longer lives at home to watch her mother light the Friday night candles.

The laughter and discussion enters the air, the wind, the trees, the wild scrubby bush, the mud enclosures at the end of the long sandy road, the farm workers' homes.

The night goes on after they've gone to bed. Ian and Danielle wrap up together in her bed before it grows too small and Ian leaps back onto his twin bed. Anna goes to bed with a candle that blows in the breezes of the house. She refuses to blow it out, telling Jake she can't sleep when it's so dark. He sighs, compromises, and leaves a lit lamp hanging outside her door.

She sleeps, but when he gets up to turn it down later in the night, she wakes up, and he caresses her cheek for a long time before she sleeps again, and he creeps back to his own room. He blows out his freshly lit candle, falling asleep to the creaks and bends of the roof of the farmhouse that will one day be his.

A car is a weapon

‘Eight thousand rand.’

She takes a sip of tea. ‘It’s eight thousand rand to get a driver’s licence. And it’s two thousand five hundred to get a learner’s.’

‘You’re not serious,’ I say, ‘you’re not really going to do it.’

She shrugs, smiles, in her strange accented English she says, ‘You know I need a licence. Without it I can’t get a better job. It’s easier this way, quicker. I could wait years otherwise. What if I don’t pass my test?’

Pauli swallows the last of her tea, looks at her watch, another half an hour remaining before her lunch hour is over. She’s talking on condition of anonymity.

‘The woman who organises it, Sandra, she had a nervous breakdown. She was handling too much; she couldn’t keep up with demand. She was off for three weeks. So now it takes a little longer, a month they say, but then you have it. A driver’s licence, an ID book, even a passport. Whatever! So long as you have the money to pay for it.’

I am incensed. ‘That’s why there are so many accidents on our roads,’ I say, ‘because too many people are buying their licences and they don’t know how to drive. The other day a guy just pulled out of a parking space as I was driving by. He didn’t know to look in the mirror, wait till it was safe, and then go. *He* probably bought his licence too. You can’t do this Pauli, I won’t let you. You must learn to drive. You *must* go through a driving instructor.’

‘Mike is going to teach me.’

Mike, her boyfriend. ‘Mike’s not a driving instructor. They teach you things like defensive driving and all that, Mike doesn’t know about that. Why don’t you just go for lessons and then book a test? And if you fail once you book again and eventually you’ll get it. That’s how we all got our licences.’

But her mind is made up and I see Pauli pulling the blinds down on this conversation. We have known each a few months, meeting at a counselling course. As part of her psychology degree Pauli must put in a few hours at a local counselling centre. Me, I am just marking time, volunteering, trying to give something back to society. Her boyfriend though is refusing to take her to the once a week counselling slot. She can’t not go, it all counts towards credits to her degree. Hence the eight thousand rand. It was Mike who suggested it, said he’d pay. He’d have to: what Pauli makes as a sales assistant in a boutique wouldn’t cover it. She’s not even paying for her studies.

Pauli looks at me, mouth closed yet twisted. ‘I better get going.’

‘There’s still time before you get back.’

‘No,’ her voice trails off, ‘there are things I need to do in the shop.’

‘What things.’ It’s not a question.

I keep staring at her. Pauli is beautiful, with dark, dusky skin and almondish brown eyes. Her English is overlaid with the soft sounds of her Ethiopian origins. Men stare as hard as I do as we sit there, having lunch and drinking tea before she has to go back to the shop. I am interviewing her about life as an immigrant in this country, or, I am meant to be interviewing her. Instead this one-sided process has turned into a tirade about why she shouldn’t bribe her way into the system, why she shouldn’t buy a licence. She’s going to get up and walk out, interview over and tentative friendship shattered already.

I’ve heard the stories: at work a colleague told me how her boyfriend has been waiting months to get an appointment to write the test, just an appointment. You have to stand in line at 7 a.m. and there are only a few appointments, if you don’t get one, you have to come back next week. The window where you book is only open one day a week, for an hour.

Can I blame her? It may take months for Pauli to get an appointment. She may fail the test. She may have to wait more months. It’s as though the system is deliberately designed to test your patience, make you pay the bribe. I could report this Sandra woman who organises these fake passports, IDs. But would I have the courage? Wouldn’t I be too scared of being found out, set upon? Could I make an anonymous tip off to the police?

Would they *do* anything?

‘I’ll teach you to drive,’ I say. Pauli is getting up, she stops. Sits back down.

‘When?’ she asks. ‘I work such odd hours and you’re busy ...’

‘I remember my driving lessons well enough,’ I say, ‘I took the tough K53 test, some of the things you had to learn were ridiculous but that’s why I am such a good driver today. I’m aware of the road

and looking for dangers, so if anyone should teach you, it's me.'

'Thank you. I really mean that, I know I need to learn, but you know I can't wait.'

'Promise me one thing,' I say, 'you won't buy that licence till we've been out a few times, till I'm sure you can handle the road, okay? And you must promise that every time you go anywhere with Mike you'll do the driving so you'll get some practice.'

'And if I don't promise ...?'

She has me there. She knows I have no recourse.

I pay the bill, standing up and throwing notes on the table. 'Don't play around, Pauli; every time you drive anything you have people's lives at stake.' I sound like a pedant, some sort of mother figure, even though I am only a few years older than Pauli, who is twenty-four. 'A car is a weapon, Pauli.'

'I know that Jill,' she says.

We walk out together through the African market. A man is beating a drum, a woman tries to get me interested in buying a batik from Zimbabwe, and another man implores me to look at his set of wooden masks from the Congo. All brought down to a market in Johannesburg.

This is typical touristy Africa, I think, as I walk away.

The game

You are the villain to my seductress. You wear dark shades with orange frames, and an unruly moustache. I dress in thrift shop gear and a long chain of pearls encircles my throat.

I am the murderer, but must keep quiet about this, otherwise all the fun goes out of the game. The guessing and the role modelling begins, I call you Harry Wrong-Long, and know that's not your real name. Your real name is much more ordinary. The woman across from you has a surname like an Italian pasta, she's playing the role of an Italian countess. She has long sinewy legs that curve over the armrest of the chair. I keep calling her Fettuccine, but her real name is Sara. The other woman, whom I've only just met, dresses up like a 1920s flapper and her skirt has shimmery blue tassels. I call her Marlene, I keep forgetting her real name. She was introduced to me at the start as Marlene, which is her role: the appellation has stuck. The men are dreary: a man in a slick suit; a non-descript character, the butler, and two small frail policemen, one dimmer than the other, and he's pretty dim to start with. The policemen are clueless. They keep summing up at the end of every scene by stating the obvious and coming to no conclusions.

Chips and dips are brought out, aubergine-coloured pâté, triangle wedges of basil-flavoured chips. The wine is red, it flows smoothly. The man with the accent, one of the policemen, gets bored halfway through the first round. He finds it ridiculous. I am not drinking and try to catch your eye beneath the dark shades. You are looking away.

I play my part; I drop red herrings and false clues. I do not tell the truth. I lie shamelessly. I am as bored as the man with the accent, because I know I'm the killer. It is hard keeping everyone guessing.

During the break, we eat butternut lasagne, the game spread before us, characters dropped like masks, names revealed and used. You take off your orange-framed glasses and put on your real glasses. The woman with the food name tells me her profession: she is not a model, but a marketing consultant. I have no idea what a marketing consultant does. But I should know, so I say nothing.

It resumes. We are halfway through when the policemen disappear to buy cigars down the road. We will do without them. The guessing carries on.

* * *

The aeroplanes leave streaky plumes across the blue skies of London. Long white trails dissipating in the clear skies. The cold is icy, raw, numbing. It eats through layers of clothes, one pair of pants, another pair of thermal pants, and stockings with it. Clothes become stretched to accommodate the extra layers.

We do not do anything important. We do not have fixed hours. It doesn't matter what time we get up, or go to bed, or eat meals, because there is nothing important to do. So, we eat late, rise late.

Our landlady is someone we met through a South African friend. Her name is Tina, and when she visited Johannesburg I took her through the city, we saw a movie, ate supper together. We had a

rapport the few times we met. We spoke and found we had lives in common, or so we thought. In this new cold world of London, she is made redundant a month before we arrive. She is living on the dole; her boyfriend is a German graduate student of political studies. Peter works an afternoon a week, selling clothes at a charity shop. Soon after arriving, I laughingly record a new message on the answering machine. 'Welcome to the house of the unemployed,' I joke, 'we'll take any jobs, just leave your name and number!' Tina is not amused, she records a more sober message, says nothing to us. One day she mutters a comment that she's sick of everybody saying they are unemployed, it's enough. I hold my tongue, in our room that night I mention it to you: 'But we are all unemployed!'

It's early days and we are trying to optimistic, trying to keep peace with Tina, tetchy, unemployed for a few months now, Christmas is approaching and jobs are drying up.

We watch television, rent videos, walking along the cold streets to the video shop, and eat Heinz cake puddings that you heat up in the microwave, and then we watch the rented movies. It's two or three in the morning before we all go to sleep, four people taking it in turns to use one bathroom. I sleep easily here, in a room where the window looks directly onto the street and I can hear the clip-clop of people walking to work, or the tube, the bus, walking home. I sleep through it all, noises, cars, footsteps. And we rise late. It's eleven before we surface, twelve when we eat breakfast. When we decide we want to go into town early, we have to set the alarm for eight or nine.

But mostly there is no purpose to the days. We rise late, eat, and wash under a lukewarm shower, and dress to go into the business centre. We go to internet cafes and check email, surf the web, sometimes we send out CVs. We browse in the mall, we look at books, we treat ourselves to coffee at a café. We buy food at Tesco

for the evening meal, we return home when it's already dark. Night comes at four o'clock.

Tina is at the dining room table when we return at night, sending emails from her laptop, looking for jobs. She is preoccupied, dressed in yesterday's sweat pants and top. 'She doesn't bath every day,' you notice. You see these things, having grown up in England, you notice, remembering your own childhood, the infrequent bathing. I shrug, not caring.

Tina sands down the rot that is accumulating around the wood surrounding the sink. Peter can't stand the rot, so Tina sands and varnishes. A job well done, she tells me when she's finished. But mostly, she is preoccupied with her job hunt, her home. She cycles to the shop with her bags, we watch her, cycling back, handlebars balanced with groceries, a whirlpool of energy and noise.

The days are slow and fast. Weeks melt into weekends, and back into weeks. No one is getting a job in the house of unemployment. Only Tina gets an interview, and flubs it, she says, because she's not technical enough and spoke too much. She calls us both 'lads' and says that when she first came to England from Ireland she did anything to ensure that she could stay. She was a waitress, a chambermaid for a while, a secretary, a receptionist. We look at her incredulously when she suggests these things.

'I can only type with two fingers,' I say by way of explanation, 'I can't be a secretary.'

As for being a chambermaid, you have seen the way I clean floors, leaving streaks and grime behind in a sludgy mess. We didn't leave behind our highly paid professional jobs in South Africa to be maids and secretaries. We left because London was going through a boom, and jobs were plentiful, and I thought I could eventually become a writer, while you dreamed of swapping your corporate manager profile to work in publishing.

That was before the planes slammed into the World Trade Centre. That was before the world's economies started spiralling, and economies dwindled and jobs dried up. Our timing was off. We read daily of redundancies and downsizing.

Tina gets impatient when we bring this up at the end of the day. She cleans, washes dishes, humming. She chops vegetables for her and Peter while we eat crumbed turkey breasts from Tesco with canned vegetables.

We continue to scour the newspapers however, looking for jobs. We are convinced they are out there. We had been told that London was swarming with vacancies, there was hardly any unemployment. Months later we look back at our naivety in believing these figures. Such was our thirst to go that we believed all the good we had heard, and disregarded all the negatives. A friend of a friend said it was hard to get jobs, and she had to travel two hours each day to get to and from work. We thought she was just being negative and difficult. Another friend who had emigrated said she had been tired for the first five years in London. Another said the English were hard to get to know and difficult to make friends with. We disregarded it all.

The cold bites ears, nipping through gloves and sweaters. The streetlamps are yellow as we walk the frosty streets home, moving briskly, as briskly as those others, the real Londoners we call them, those who live here and have jobs. We stride as quickly, still uncertain that we are not going to be mugged or attacked. It still feels strange that we can do this, walk home in the dark, and it's safe and it's normal. As we walk we look into people's homes, they do not draw curtains here, rooms are left open to prying eyes as souls are not. The rooms are painted in a variety of hues: dark kitchen blues and heavy varnished-looking reds, pale butter yellows. People read in them, or sit watching television. In the kitchens they cook as darkness and cold grip the city.

When we first arrived here I wrote a bad poem about turning thirty and emigrating to another country with the wrong man, and knowing that the relationship was doomed. It was a lousy poem, I knew it as I wrote it, but it seemed the only way of expressing the situation I found myself in. As we lay together in that lumpy bed in our landlady's flat, silent, waiting for sleep to take hold, and thinking about the shape our new lives would take, I imagined that we would probably be together another six months till we had saved some money from the jobs we were going to find soon, and then I thought we would finally separate.

It had been a mistake to go overseas together, I thought as I lay and planned. You were the wrong man for me. We were never going to make it. Yet, here I was, just turned thirty, voluntarily unemployed, in London at the start of their winter. All we had was each other. We were stuck together, glued by force of circumstances, bound by the same uncertain futures.

There were screaming matches in the streets of London as we strode towards the train station. I blamed you for bringing me here, I blamed you for the weather, I said you had blackmailed me into leaving everything I knew, and a good job, for this. You strode behind me, silent, accused, only occasionally arguing back. That made me even more angry. I wanted something to punch against, I needed you to fight, to rage and scream, I needed you to say that this had been a mistake. But, you didn't say it. You caught the trains and smiled as they rolled into the heart of London, you carried our backpack of waters and food uncomplainingly when we made the journeys. We could not afford to eat out and so carried food with us. Nothing got you down. You imagined our new life, you priced furniture with me, looked at adverts in the newspapers for computers.

We registered with national health. We saw a nurse, a doctor. We were in the system. After six weeks I could finally open a bank

account and succeeded in opening two. I could now join a library, which you, without proof of address conferred by that English bank account, could not. Weeks after arriving I was more fully entrenched in the system that you were. I was starting to feel like I belonged, even though it was I who was agitated, uncomfortable, longing to return home.

As the end of the year approached, the days rolled on into each other. The radiators were hot to the touch in the mornings, the windows streaked with moisture, leaving black marks on the lace curtains. We walked through silent streets to shopping centres filled with Christmas shoppers looking for bargains. We were outsiders then: we didn't have jobs and were conserving our money, so we each bought each other a book for Christmas, and that was that. We watched Londoners shopping, people walked home laden with their parcels from Next and WH Smith, wrapped presents peeked out from the bags. At Marks and Spencer we bought food, I tried on coats and jackets, I couldn't afford any of them, but it was good to look.

There was the comfort of the warmth of being indoors, the hot smoky mall where people still lit up cigarettes, as we nursed coffees. The pattern of our days followed the rhythm of library, internet café, browse in the bookshop, drink coffee, pick up food for supper. The days were aimless, but filled with routine. I didn't belong here, the truth was bleak and uncomfortable. We had left behind our lives and jobs in South Africa, and yet, I didn't belong in this country where people spoke English littered with question marks and rhetorical questions, where the listening to the language was like riding along rolling hills, the vowels rounded and high. By the end, every time I heard an English person end a comment with, 'Innit?' I wanted to scream. I started copying them in mock parody.

One night, watching television, we came across a panel debate about contraception. An Australian woman who had lived in England

for twenty years still had the twang in her voice and complained that there weren't enough types of contraception available. 'We need a supermarket of contraceptives,' she whined. We looked at each other astonished. Such debates had never been discussed on South African TV. Life and death issues were more important: such as the growing Aids pandemic, rising unemployment and desperate poverty. Contraception was available, wasn't that enough? And weren't there enough types of contraception on the market? Apparently not. Not according to the Australian woman, and not according to some of the others taking part in the debate.

Watching the Christmas shoppers, or walking home along the cold icy streets, or being buffeted by pedestrians as they strode quickly home along London's streets, I had felt that I wasn't English, would never be English, would never belong to this society. Listening to the debate on contraceptives, I thought I knew that I could never be English. I could not debate, or listen to a debate on the fact that there weren't enough types of contraceptives available, without feeling outraged and then amused. The English had the luxury of debating such topics: I was still mired in the moral dilemmas of the life and death issues that dominated our lives in South Africa. Was this what I would be returning to? Did my lack of empathy towards such debates mean I wasn't meant to be living in a cold, prosperous northern country?

Christmas was a roast chicken from Tesco. In the supermarket, the day before Christmas, we shopped as frantically as everyone else, the shelves stripped bare almost, grabbing at what we wanted. As we rummaged for bread, an old woman muttered to me, 'There's nothing left. Some people don't leave anything for anyone else. They're just selfish.' I didn't answer. Why blame everyone else, I thought, staring at the grease-wrapped packages of white lard lining the shelves.

'Have a good Christmas,' the teller called out, as we struggled to

pack our food, and pay at the same time. We trudged home in the dark, the house was ours that week. Tina and Peter had gone off on holiday. On Christmas Day we ate chicken and drew in your scrapbook and phoned family. It grew dark, and I was sad and sullen. I wasn't angry then, just sad. We had decided to return home. The dream was dead then. I couldn't wait to leave, now that we had decided to go, but I felt as sad as you, saying goodbye to all that we had hoped for.

The lights of London reflected on the river Thames. Buses and trains moved across a bridge as we looked. I saw a man reading a paper, a woman spoke on a cellphone, and then it was just a blur as the train sped away. The interiors of double-decker buses were lit up, faces were blank, or absorbed in books, music from earphones, hands clutching parcels. We sat on seats outside the Poetry Library, waiting. Doors to an auditorium opened, and concert goers enjoyed interval. The real Londoners had the money to go to concerts, to structure their lives, to plan for these things. I drank water from one of the water bottles we carried, the Thames a mirage beyond the windows. It was one of our last nights. When the bus carried us away from the Thames, you looked, one last time, at the river, your face twisted, sad, resigned. I was taking you away from life, and I felt I was returning to life. I tried to tell you to stay, I tried to say that we didn't have a future together, but you weren't listening and I wasn't trying hard enough. I needed you back with me, selfishly I admitted it, even though I knew I was taking you on, taking you back somehow, as we returned. I knew it couldn't be the end then.

* * *

By the winter of our second year together I knew it was over. I preferred reading to sex. We tried so hard, and still we talked about England: what we would find there, dreams would be realised, even

though we would be starting from scratch. I wondered then, often, if we were doing the right thing in leaving our lives, our jobs, families. I wondered if you were the right man to do it with. We decided to go, agreeing that we had to stick together for at least six months. We could break up after then, but we had to at least provide moral support for the other for that half a year. There were doubts then, but who listens to doubts when you're about to go and live in a country where you believe you will be free?

* * *

A train roars past us at the station. Hair flies in our faces, the noise loud, deafening, unbelievable. Talk stops as this express train goes past. It's a sunny day in London, the light high and pale. But cold, so cold. We hug coats tight around ourselves, waiting for the train to take us to the City. It's mid-morning, the train won't be crowded. Others stand on the platform, waiting for the train, a man with a walking stick sits near me on the bench. We're silent, waiting, no one talks as we scan the board with the times of trains seared across it. We wait. I think of the warm sunshine in Johannesburg. I wonder what's waiting for us there. I can't imagine the heat of summer at this moment, I try and then stop. It's impossible. Instead I think of other things in Johannesburg: driving a car again, wondering what job I will find, wondering where going back will lead me. Another train flies past, windows blurring, wheels screeching on the metal, white and blue sparks crackle along the rail line.

* * *

One night we go to hear poetry being read in a little café off a side street near Covent Garden. Poets read in the little room underneath

the restaurant area. The place is packed, the poets are enthusiastic, loud, passionate. You feel it rippling across the room, the energy, even when the poetry is bad, it sounds good as the poets act out their verses. I know I am leaving something behind here.

* * *

We spent New Year's Eve indoors. Tina and Peter suggested we go with them to a pub. I wanted to go, in some part of myself, even though there had been animosity between us all. But it was cold that night, minus eight degrees Celsius, said the radio. DJs warned motorists and pedestrians to beware of black ice and treacherous conditions on the roads. We are pedestrians in this new world, and you, with your English background and memories of English winters, warn me that it will be difficult walking. By the time we celebrate the new year and return home it will be even colder, we might slip on the almost invisible black ice, and I am cold, so cold, even in the day, wearing my three layers of pants, my blood is still thin and used to the heat, you tell me. I will freeze. You are right. I reluctantly sigh. I don't want to walk on black ice, I don't even particularly like pubs, but I want to celebrate New Year, even if it's unimportant to you. But I give in, and we stay indoors and watch a movie on TV, it seems a failure, but at least we are warm.

* * *

Johannesburg looked lush and tropical those first few days after we returned. It looked like a jungle with its mass of trees. It looked exotic, different, another place. It felt passionate, it was colourful, people asked, 'How are you?' all the time. The sun was warm, bright, golden. It hadn't started to burn yet.

* * *

The days fly past. Your stepfather dies a day before we return. We attend the funeral. We are dressed in black, and February is the hottest month in Johannesburg. I listen to hymns, a stranger to funerals in churches, and follow your example as to when to sit and rise. Your mother cries, leaning against your chest. My clothes are tight and hot. I read the words of the hymns as the family sings. Their eyes are red-rimmed, tearful. I am unmoved. I remember your stepfather as a racist who spoke harshly to the blacks he employed. His best friend was a man who drowned puppies and kittens, and spoke of kaffirs. But I am here for you, holding my tongue again, quiet.

I eat little cakes with icing in the hall next to the church. We hear the familiar South African accents. One man has just lost his job, others speak of work and the heat. We still feel outside of society here, once more we don't have jobs, although we know where to get them; once more we are worried about money. The car is an oven standing in the sun, I open windows to let the hot air out, and the sun blisters my skin. I sweat in my black pants and long-sleeved top. I forget about England.

The next day I get a call about freelance work. A week later I have an interview. I start a permanent job a month later. England does not exist except in dreams and memories.

* * *

We are now halfway through the game. As Harry Wrong-Long, you put your orange-framed glasses on again, and start talking in a fake accent. You are so long winded; it bores the rest of the players. One snide man, who said I wasn't an oil painting, remarks on the fact

that you take so long to get to the point. We're getting bored. The policemen haven't returned from buying their thin cigars. The guessing goes on. I throw everybody off my trail, not wanting to spoil the game for everyone else. The snide man looks at me often, he suspects something. He's tried to worm it out of me, but I act indignant when he accuses me. He carries on staring at me suspiciously throughout the evening, but he does not guess that I am the murderer.

At one point you lean back in your chair, the ridiculous orange-rimmed glasses pushed back on your head. When the others remark on your long winded playacting, I withdraw.

There is a finality to the game as the policemen return, lighting up in their corner. They haven't missed much, a few red herrings, a few suspicions. They do not suspect me. The wine bottles are emptied quickly, the cards are shuffled, clues revealed.

'I knew it was you!' the snide man exclaims when it is revealed that I am the murderer. 'There was something strange to you, the thrift shop owner, the mistress of a rich man.' I smile, quiet, pleased with my performance, I once wanted to be an actress, I reveal, and secretly I think I might have pulled it off.

The evening spent, we drive home. I have swallowed too much. I have been silent too often. But I don't complain that you held the floor for too long when you spoke, and I felt embarrassed. I toss the hat I wore into the back seat. We buy the Sunday papers being sold on the street corners.

There always comes a time when you stop complaining, when the habit of familiarity takes over, and you are either grateful for the familiarity, and resigned to the jagged edges that cut at you, or you stop. You throw away the cards, the props, the long chain of pearls, the clues. You're bare to the world then, naked, no make-up, proud, alone, a bit fearful. As honest as bleached bones.

Friends

It was ten to six, and the sun was still hot. It would be another hour before it would go down. Around us, in the outdoor coffee shop, children played, people walked, cars reversed in the parking lot. It was time to leave. We'd been talking barely an hour and it was time to leave.

I got out my notebook and asked Athina to write down her address and telephone numbers so we wouldn't lose touch again. I wrote my details down too, even though my email address hadn't changed in ten years, and she could have got hold of me anyway. I looked down. Of course, it was no longer Athina Kozma but Popadopolou, her married name. Athina pushed hair out of her face, dark glossy Greek hair. Did she really dye it as she had claimed all those years ago when we were twenty, twenty-one?

‘It’s a mousy brown,’ she had said, ‘so I dye it. It just looks better.’

It didn’t look dyed however. And all those photos of her as a child beside her glamorous mother, in them she had black hair, just like now. A momentary thought, a fleeting thought. I barely acknowledged it.

I got up to go. We kissed, cheek to cheek, the Mediterranean way. I walked away. ‘It’s just like old times,’ said her mother as we parted. ‘It could be ten years ago.’

‘See you in another ten years!’ I said, jokingly. I waved goodbye again to Athina, sitting there in the shade, a pensive look on her face, as she watched me, her mother, her young son playing with the tin car on the pavement.

* * *

In the weeks after that accidental meeting in a shopping mall I think of her often. Christmas comes and I think of Athina with her family at Sun City Casino where her mother booked them for the holidays. I think of her at New Year and wonder what she’s doing.

On a sweltering Johannesburg day, when the sky is thick with wanting to rain, and the air sluggish with heat, I think of her and her young son and husband, back in icy cold London. She’s on my mind, much as she had been on my mind for months now, flitting across it repeatedly. Once I even looked her up on Facebook but the Athina Popadopolou listed there had not responded. I must have sensed that we were going to bump each other after all those years. I had always been intuitive about her.

I remember that time, we were both twenty-five then. Athina had finally finished her degree, after wasted years and false starts. She had graduated and was flying off to Greece for a holiday. We sat at yet another coffee shop and discussed the future. Athina was going on holiday and then coming back to South Africa: ‘I’ll work here

a year, get some experience and then I'll go to London,' she said. London, that golden beacon, beckoning us both with our European passports.

'No, you won't,' I said suddenly, 'you're going to go straight to London from Greece. I'm not going to see you for a few years.'

She was adamant she was coming back to Johannesburg, saying no, I was wrong.

So I wasn't surprised when I got a letter a few weeks later: she had decided to go straight to London, and was bunking down in a tiny flat. 'You were right, my friend!' she wrote.

I read the letter grimly. I had known all along. She'd done it before me. Reached fabled London.

A few weeks later I got another excited letter from her, she had found a boyfriend! There were exclamation marks all over the letter. And again, I wasn't surprised.

We had first met because of one of her boyfriends.

* * *

On a hot summer afternoon in December all these years later I bump into her in a busy shopping mall. Weeks before Christmas and the mall is festooned with strings of lights. It's the holiday season again and no-one is interested in working. I left work early, popping in to see my mother at the boutique where she sells clothes. Boutiques are empty, but restaurants are packed. There is a sense of holiday and fun in the air, the country shutting down for the silly season. 'I saw Athina,' my mother says, 'I told her you'd be in later and she said maybe she'd pop in.'

'Did you get her number?' I ask, but she hadn't, merely telling me she hadn't recognised her Athina.

'Marie!'

It's Athina, flanked by her tall husband, face clear of make-up, hair scraped back. She is plumper now, blending into the background in a way that she hadn't when we had first met fifteen years ago. I recognise her, of course. Through our periodic meetings over the years I had watched her change, registering the changes as women do when looking at their friends. The lined or unlined faces, the colour of the hair, the thick glasses worn instead of contact lenses, the worry that creeps in, settling around the crevices of mouths.

'Join us for coffee?'

When I approach the table I see Athina and her husband holding hands, a small gesture of their love still alive after the decade they have known each other, for this was the boyfriend Athina had written to tell me she had met within months of arriving in London. 'If it hadn't been for George ...' her voice had trailed off, 'he kept me alive and together those first few years.'

I sit; order an iced cappuccino on this hot day. We smile at each other, where do you begin to capture what's happened? The last time I had seen her was years and lifetimes ago.

'Where's your son?' I ask. I remember her pregnant the winter I was in London, wearing those uncharacteristically thick glasses instead of the contacts. The next time I had seen her, back in Johannesburg, her son was fifteen months, crawling, named, a presence in her life instead of a bump in front of her. Declan. 'He was a very wanted baby,' Athina had told me.

'He's with my mom,' she says, 'They were seeing a kiddies' movie while George and I went to see an adult one, for a change! We've just seen *The Lives of Others*, have you seen it?'

I shake my head, 'No, but I want to, about the East Germans and the Stasi police, right?'

Athina does not acknowledge my comment as my drink arrives, a straw is inserted.

‘But my mom will be here soon,’ says Athina, ‘I am dying for you to see Declan now.’

We try to talk, but Athina is worried that her mother may not see us, ‘She’s going to be looking for two people, not three,’ Athina explains anxiously. She moves seats so that she can keep an eye out.

I want to know what they have been doing, is she still working, what is she doing?

‘George,’ says Athina, ‘do you want to tell Marie what we’ve been doing?’

I remember her in London, my mind keeps going back to that scene: meeting her at her office. Pregnant, hair again scraped back then, with the thick glasses that I had never seen her wear, they made her look dowdy. Where was the beautiful friend I had known? Of all my friends Athina had been the most glamorous: dying and having her hair done regularly, plucking her eyebrows, waxing her legs, going for regular facials, and of course, the clothes. The sexy expensive clothes, the tight miniskirts, the off-the-shoulder tops. I had barely recognised her myself that day in a dull office in the East End. She was going to stand reference for me, help me open up a bank account in England, an undertaking that seemed about as difficult as finding a job.

‘What do you do here?’ I had asked as I followed her as she got a coat.

‘I’m a PA,’ she smiled. ‘I know ... all that work getting my degree and then I’m just a PA!’ She didn’t seem unhappy, not even resigned, just simply accepting of the fact.

‘I lost my job and George was made redundant,’ says Athina to me now.

George takes up the thread: instead of looking for jobs, they decided to be their own bosses and opened up their own business. They import crafts from South Africa and sell them to shops and

galleries in London.

I stare at them astonished: I never knew Athina was interested in running a business. She had studied journalism, communication, public relations.

‘It was hard,’ she says. ‘We didn’t have much money, but we did it. And we’re finally beginning to break even.’

‘More and more people our age are opening up their own businesses,’ I say. ‘We don’t like working for other people, we like the freedom of being our own bosses. As you know it’s something I also want to do, I’m always talking about it.’

It’s time to ask me what I am doing. We’ve established that I am not married. It bristles: the fact that this matters in their eyes. But I have a good job, a respected job, I tell them I manage a department of food scientists. We consult with a large supermarket group, helping to create new foods and products. I tell them about a new range we are developing, a new low fat range of foods that is going to take the guesswork out for those who want to follow healthier diets.

And then I stop, because they’re not really listening, or if they are, they’re not really taking it in. Or, if they do, it doesn’t matter, not really. I should be married, I should be having children, I should be on another kind of treadmill.

‘Are you seeing anyone?’ Athina asks and I airily wave my hand, saying, ‘Bits and bobs, you know, bits of men.’

We laugh, it’s the first time this afternoon, but the tension soon returns.

* * *

We met, as I said, because of one of Athina’s boyfriends.

She was engaged at the time to a doctor from Chile. She was barely twenty-one. She had met him somewhere out of her usual

social circle, and wanted to learn Spanish so that when she flew to meet his family the next year she could try and communicate with them. I was also about to turn twenty-one – recently back from a trip to Spain where I had met long lost relatives – and I too wanted to communicate with them in their own language.

We connected through those lessons. She gave me lifts home, I still didn't drive then, and we became friends outside of the classes. She invited me to lunch, we went to a movie. We saw more and more of each other even as we stopped attending the lessons, neither of us very good at trying to learn the language. Of course, the fact that she broke up with her fiancé halfway through the course also contributed to the lack of interest.

We forgot about our lessons, moved on, but became fast friends. When exams ended we hit the town, going out night after night: movies, theatre, restaurants, coffee shops. We made a pact one night that even after we got boyfriends Friday nights would be our nights, 'man-free nights!' we shouted as we drove through the silent, dark streets of Johannesburg suburbia. The air was hot and soupy in the car after days of sweltering heat, another December. But Athina wouldn't let me open the windows too far; even then we were afraid of the crime that was creeping through the country like a foul wind.

She left for Athens to holiday there with her mother and father just before Christmas. I missed her, filled in the gaps with others, but her absence was there now, an absence that had not existed before. When she returned she was as exuberant as before and we resumed our friendship as she started studying at university.

Months later she met another man, Greek this time. I saw less and less of her. Friday nights were not sacrosanct as I had thought they would be. Did I ever say something? I might have, I was naïve then, hurt as she threw all her energies into loving this man and

our times together were relegated to lunch dates, occasional movies and sometimes dinners at her house where I met the new boyfriend and instantly disliked him. But she adored him, and even spoke of stopping her studies after they had been together a year.

‘He’ll look after me,’ she said. ‘I don’t need to study and struggle to get my degree when he’s got more than enough to provide for me.’

I looked at her aghast, all I managed was an anguished, ‘Will you change your name?’

But she needn’t have answered me. Years after they broke up she told me he was the real thing. ‘I would have married him and it will always hurt, although I will get used to it and it will get better. I loved him; I loved him as I have never loved another man. It was real. You know, Marie, you simply know.’

A few years later I did know, and she was there to commiserate as I had done. ‘You’ll find someone better; I never thought he was strong enough for you. But it gets better.’

We drank milkshakes that time at a Milky Lane, in yet another mall. The light was hard and brightly fluorescent as we sipped the sweet icy drinks and watched couples make out in corners. We were still so young then, twenty-four, but so much graver than people our ages. We wore make-up in a time when make-up was something older people wore, we discussed with serious intent whether we were going to leave South Africa, we watched art movies and thought we would land up with older men.

I look at Athina’s face properly now, she’s changed and yet her face is as smooth and unlined as it ever was. Except for a deepening somehow in her expression, she could still be in her twenties, the face smooth, the eyes fresh, unlined. But there’s an anxiety there that makes me uncomfortable, disturbs the air, makes me tense.

‘Ah there’s my mother!’ says Athina, waving as her mother winds

her way through the table. The release, the relief that this disruption brings, mixed in with disappointment. I want to talk, find out who Athina is now, but that's unlikely to happen with yet another person around. And yet, we need something to tear through the tension.

'Mom, you remember Marie,' says Athina.

'Of course.'

Of course. How could she not.

Years flash by in an instant, memories compress, a dinner where her mother cooked a fish so drenched in garlic I was sick all night, another night, a dancing party with her mother zipped into a tight leather dress, days, nights, events. I saw Athina often enough to become a presence in her home, of course her mother remembers me.

She's older now, naturally, and there are threads of grey along her forehead, lined, and yet, there's something alive and something exuberant, something that's lacking in her worried daughter. She smiles, her face lit up by the laugh, the eyes crinkling mischievously. She fumbles for a cigarette as she orders a Coke Lite.

And there's Declan. Athina picks him up, a tall boy of five, with dark hair and long eyelashes. I tell her he is beautiful and he is going to break women's hearts one day. Athina is silent but I know but she's savouring the praise. George looks indulgently at his son, face soft and misty.

'How are you Marie?' her mother cuts in, inserting a straw into the glass, drawing on her cigarette. I tell her I'm fine and the next question is predictable.

'Are you married?' she asks, not expecting me to be to be, and I don't disappoint.

'No,' I say. But why do I want to say yes? Why don't I make up a boyfriend, a significant other, an impending engagement? Why is it so important to say yes? Why doesn't she ask what I do for a living and whether I am happy? The fact that I don't have a ring on my

finger, a man to care for and to care for me, this matters so much. And I buy into it. I should have a man by now, not bits and bobs, a man to share the mortgage, to travel with, and I feel that hollow as keenly as they expect me too.

At thirty-six you should have your own place; it should be at least half paid off. You should have been married for four to six years, and you should be settled. You shouldn't be thinking of emigrating, you shouldn't have just sold a house and still have debts to pay off, you should not be sharing a flat with a friend till you can decide what to do, squatting in a spare room. You shouldn't be wondering what country you're going to spend the rest of your life in ...

And we discuss the state of the nation instead now, emigration.

'My mom's stopped asking me to move back,' says Athina as her mom looks at her. 'Are you happy here now Marie, are you glad you came back?'

It's a long, complicated story. 'Yes and no,' I say. 'I couldn't have stayed in London, not then, and not with David. He was wrong for me – I realised that as soon as I woke up after a couple of days there. My thirtieth birthday and I realised he was the wrong man for me. And I couldn't go on the Underground, we had to catch buses everywhere ... you can't emigrate like that. I had to come back, sort myself out.'

'And you have.' It's more of a statement than a question from Athina. 'Mom! Watch Declan,' she yells suddenly.

'I am!' her mother says, half turned in her chair to watch Declan and still hear us. Now she turns around entirely, eyes focused on Declan playing with a small tin car, racing between people on this late afternoon.

'I get so scared,' says Athina, 'is it safe to let him play like this? I worry that someone will snatch him up in a second. I'm not used to

the crime in this country – you have to watch your back all the time, anything could happen.’

‘Hmm,’ I say, ‘you do have to be careful, but I think it’s pretty safe here.’ We’re in an open air shopping centre, surrounded by shops, restaurants, a parking lot. It’s as safe as anywhere now. ‘As long as your mom watches him, it’s fine.’

Athina isn’t convinced, looking at Declan running, her brow frowning. George has gone off to get rolls at a bakery around the corner and it’s just Athina and me, sitting there. Except it’s not. Her attention is on her son, even though her mother is watching him, and yet still Athina can’t relax, and still I can’t relate.

I may now want to be married, to have a man at my side to call my husband, but I have never wanted children. I’ve never felt that overwhelming desire to be pregnant, to be a mother. In fact, the opposite. I have nightmares in which I discover that I am pregnant, I wake up violently, relieved that it’s all a dream, and that I am not pregnant, not expecting, not bringing a new life into the world.

Instead I ask the obvious. ‘Are you going to have another?’

‘We’ve tried Marie, for years now and nothing’s happened. There’s nothing wrong with me or George and yet nothing’s happened. Declan keeps asking for a brother or a sister. I asked him what he wanted for Christmas and he said a brother or a sister, and yet nothing’s happened.’ Athina looks resigned.

Why do I feel a twinge of pleasure here? Why can’t I feel sorry for her, wanting so much to have another child and unable to? What sort of a person am I that instead of feeling for her I am pleased that something’s wrong in her life, that it’s not as perfect as I thought it would be all those years ago?

* * *

‘You’ll have two children,’ I once told her. We were out with another friend of ours, Susan, all only children. I could sense things sometimes, not well enough to make any kind of living at it, but enough that pictures sometimes came into my head and I could translate them into vague ideas of the future.

‘I see you with two children, both boys,’ I’d said. ‘You’re at a window, it’s night time, the lights of the city are glittering ahead of you.’

We laughed. She did not ask me about a husband, and I did not say that I did not see him, that in this slice of the future she was alone, a single mother, with two children, and a career.

And I wouldn’t have – even if she had asked. ‘I don’t want to be one of those single desperate women you see,’ Athina had said once, ‘They’re predatory. In their thirties and forties, unmarried, desperately searching for a man.’

The picture was a bleak one, revealing as much about her as about any possible future. Is that how Athina saw me now? A predator in her thirties looking for a man?

* * *

I think of this premonition as we sit there, on the cusp of the holiday season, late Friday afternoon, start of the weekend, start of the holiday season. What can I say to her remark? ‘Have you thought of adopting?’

‘Oh no, Marie! I could never do that, not after I have already had my own child! I could never do that.’

‘Oh.’ It’s yet another thing that I don’t understand. If you can’t have another and you want your child to have a sibling, what could be simpler? We had discussed growing up as only children, Athina, Susan and me. We all agreed that we wouldn’t want that, wouldn’t have

chosen it. I hadn't wanted children, but if I had planned on having any, I would have had at least two, Susan and Athina had agreed with me. None of us would have planned on the lonely life of an only.

And somehow, of course, it's not right to remind her of this. Who am I to tell her that she should adopt if she can't have another? I barely know this Athina, this worried, dowdy-looking woman at the table, clearly so in love still with her husband, enamoured of her son. What can I say?

Instead, I ask, 'Do you ever hear from Susan?'

Old friends, memories, the topics keep circulating toward the past. 'No,' says Athina. She knows slightly more than I do. Susan emigrated to New Zealand with her new husband eight or so years ago.

'She was really sick though,' says Athina. She doesn't know what was wrong. Except that Susan couldn't work for a while. We let that tail off. We discuss other mutual friends, news is old, dead. We have both lost touch with others. Some are, inevitably, overseas.

'When I visit South Africa now I don't contact my old friends,' says Athina. 'It became too tiring seeing everybody. We only really have two weeks here, and I find myself rushing here there and everywhere seeing everybody and being exhausted by it all.'

I nod, it's a complaint I have heard often from friends who now live overseas and return to visit. Days become an endless round of coffees and lunch and then more coffees catching up on the years missed. Some friends have decided on a big lunch at which all the friends come and you must catch up as you will. Others, like Athina, have let old friendships slide. Still others send emails from around the world asking when you're going to visit them in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, England. You talk about the sliding rand, hardly needing to make an excuse, but still, it still feels like cheating.

'Let's exchange details before I go,' I say, as we wind up.

She looks relieved, or am I being sensitive? No, she's just sitting

there, not making a move to say, Stay, have supper with us (would I, could I?), not saying, let's keep in contact, let's see each other again before I go back to London.

'Well, enjoy the rest of your time here,' I say, 'have a good Christmas, And if I'm ever in London, I'll let you know. Maybe we can have coffee.'

Athina nods, and we know that I'm not coming to London anytime soon, and that her holiday will pass peacefully, uneventfully, surrounded by her family and that's the way she wants it.

'Bye bye my friend, look after yourself,' she says. We kiss, European-style, on both cheeks. George is back from his bakery errand, he shakes my hand, wishes me well. I say goodbye to her mother, to Declan, and stride away, aware of their eyes on my back as I go.

I breathe a sigh of relief as I get into my car in the parkade, ease into the early evening traffic, now thinned by holidays, and people away at the coast.

I glance quickly at the piece of paper with her address on, and her telephone number in London. Why didn't she give me her email address? I'm not going to phone her, not unless I visit London, and I have no immediate plans to do that. I'm not going to write a letter either – that too is so much easier to ignore than an email, somehow. I gave her my email address, but doubt I will hear from her.

I can't explain to myself why I wanted to see her again, however briefly and however many years have gone past. She made the decision not to stay in contact.

Yet it's not always about keeping in touch with people, it's more like trying to touch a bit of the past. Trying to somehow find something you didn't know you were looking for.

Cleo and Nic

It comes up quickly. Years roll on, and suddenly there's a scar cut into your midriff where an appendix nearly burst at fifty-five. He has a mark to indicate where his gallbladder was removed and most of his teeth are crowned now. And while his hair is nearly gone, hers has grey showing through her red curls. What passes for a life? Forty years gone; children, a wife; an eye on retirement? A mother passed away.

Tuesday nights and Saturday afternoons. A routine as fixed as a marriage now.

What you really want is some contentment, some security now, and all you have, though, is this. The sound of waterfalls rushing outside your window; the flapping of a luxury tent in the middle

of nowhere, perched on an island that straddles three countries: Botswana, Namibia, Zambia. Officially you're in Namibia, according to your passport stamp. But, officially doesn't count for much now.

He's meant to be at a conference in Durban, talking profitability and shares and productivity. Instead he's here, on an island somewhere in Africa, with the woman he has loved since the age of seventeen. The woman he married is at home in Johannesburg, pruning roses, visiting grandchildren or going to her women's lunches. Nic hasn't discounted the fact that perhaps she knows, now, but it's all too late.

Instead there's this: an early morning in late winter, but still temperatures are going to rise soon. Cleo next to him in a double-bed in a tent overlooking a river. The birds woke them, as did the noise of the waterfalls further downstream. They arrived late yesterday afternoon, went for a water safari, observing elephants and lechwes from their small boat, had supper and talk with the other guests. And then, despite their stolen time together and the briefness of it, they had both just fallen asleep.

They are both still tired this morning, and sex comes, but it's not easy. Increasingly, thinks Cleo, it's like this, a reluctance to begin, but the pulse is there, the snatched hours lend an urgency to it. They can't waste it. They do it anyway, noting marks and time. They're in another century now, but the past has marked everything they have done together.

They will have breakfast, they will go fly fishing with the other couple, Americans, after which, lunch. They will pass the day. The routine stamps itself powerfully on them, wherever they are now, as though they had been married for the past forty years, as though life had taken a different turning all those years ago.

It started after her mother died. After she had cleared out the room where her mother had slept, after she had rearranged the furniture, and transformed the space into a sort of spare room. Why,

she had no idea. Her niece and nephew weren't going to stay over now; they had families and lives of their own. Surprisingly other family members still lived in the city she had been born in. Few of the Rosenbergs had gone overseas, emigrating to English-speaking countries like Canada or Australia or New Zealand. She was glad of it; it kept the family together, her brother still lived a few minutes away by car, cousins were still in the country, their children close by. Unlike some of her friends whose family members had scattered to just about every other continent.

But still, she had a spare room now. She found herself giving away her mother's pink chenille bedspread, and the matching pink curtains. She bought neutral cream-coloured curtains, a duvet with a bold black and white African print, and made the room look anonymous, neutral. Almost, she thought, like a hotel room.

It was months before he called.

He had sent a card, the day of the funeral. Sent flowers on the night she held prayers. She knew it was him: no name, just a message, 'I'm thinking of you. Love, X.' The X was not for affection: and it would not be traced to him, sitting on the table with the other flowers and food for the guests. X, for Xenopoulos, his surname. X, for love and X for anonymous.

She knew where he lived, of course. From time to time she even heard news of him. Occasionally she even ran into his wife. There was that day at Woolworths, putting a packet of sirloin in her handheld basket, his wife filling a trolley.

'How are you, Cleo?' she'd asked.

'I'm fine.'

'I heard about your mother. I'm so sorry ...'

'Thank you, but she lived a long life... I had her for many years.'

'Yes. Still, after all those years. I am sorry. If you'd married, had children, grandchildren ...'

The words were out before she could stop, or had she wanted to stop them anyway? Was this her final revenge, years and decades between them?

‘I’m sorry,’ she said again, ‘I didn’t mean, I just meant that they help you cope, take your mind off things ...’

But Cleo was already moving away. ‘Goodbye, Penelope,’ she was saying, placing another package of steak in her basket

He’d called. He was sorry, so sorry to hear about her mother’s death. The spoke a while; she was at work, he was at his office. What about lunch?

Lunch. Spared asparagus slices. The sun was shining, making everything bright and luminous. Life rolled back, years unpeeled as she spoke, telling him of her mother’s death, the last lingering weeks. The death of her aunt had sparked it, she thought. For years the three of them, Cleo, her mother and her aunt, her mother’s sister, had shared a flat. Her father had died, and Cleo had moved back home to be with her mother for a while. She had moved out two years previously, at forty, finally. A coming of age, getting your own place. But her mother hated being left alone, especially in the big house she had shared with her husband. Crime was getting bad in Joburg now, and Cleo, frankly, hated the thought of leaving her mother there. So she gave up her lease, moved back in, mixing her furniture in with the worn couches of her parents. Another two years later, and her aunt, her mother’s sister, was widowed. She moved into the big house with them. Safety in numbers.

‘But I got so scared, driving at night, coming home, opening the gates in the dark. I used to drive straight up to the front door, open it as quickly as I could and bolt the door behind me. You hear all those hijacking stories ...’ Cleo said, drinking rosé carelessly, recklessly, in the middle of the afternoon, at their lunch. ‘So, we sold the house.

My mother was devastated, but I just couldn't take it anymore. We rented a beautiful old flat, three large bedrooms. My mother had companionship in the day. Stopped phoning me every five minutes. I could go out at night, there was a guard who watched you come in at night.'

'What happened?' Nic asked. He too was drinking wine in the afternoon now, doctor's warnings be damned.

'Then Aunt Jennie died. Well, it took a while. She went senile, driving Mom and I both mad, it took a year. Her daughter wouldn't have her, wouldn't put her in a home. We had a nurse for her. Mom went downhill from then. God, she'd phone me every few hours from work. She wanted to make tea, but there was no tea, or she wanted to read her book, but she couldn't find it, or could I buy food for supper, even though the fridge was full. Yet she wouldn't go out. I'd ask her to come to Bridge with me, and she'd say no, she was tired, she couldn't walk far now. So I went alone, or had the Bridge evenings at us. These last few years have been a nightmare ...'

'They must've been.'

'But through it all I wasn't wishing her dead ...'

'Of course not.'

'Then she died. Got pneumonia, in this day and age. She was in hospital a week, they thought she was getting better, and then, that was it. I got the call as I was leaving work.'

He reached across, touched her hand. They were silent as he took her fingers in his. Suddenly she felt cold, as though the sun had plunged behind buildings ... but it was a bright hot February day. When she touched her face, she found she was sweating.

'I saw Penelope at Woolworths a few weeks after Mom died.'

'Yes.' His tone was guarded.

'Did she tell you?'

'She says she sees you there, from time to time.'

‘She said I should’ve married, had children, grandchildren. As though that would lessen the pain of losing someone you’ve known for nearly sixty years.’

‘That was insensitive.’

‘Yes, it was.’

* * *

It wasn’t the first time they had met like this. After Cleo had moved out of home, finally, and his children were teenagers, she had called him. They had met in her flat one night. He said his marriage was over. But he said he needed to wait until his children were at university, five, six, seven years ... they could start over. She believed him. She wondered if she could wait, again, more years, more time going by. He said: ‘We can meet whenever you want. I travel often, Penny won’t suspect a thing.’

It was an option, she thought, a strange option. Why couldn’t she let this man go? Why couldn’t she forget him, find someone else? Let him go, let him be with his wife and children, he had made choices, they had both made choices. Why couldn’t they stick with them? What strange kind of lure drew them together? He was starting to put on weight, lose his hair and still she wanted him as much as the seventeen-year-old girl-woman she had been, remembering him leaping up the steps to meet her. And he, with his gifts and kisses, loved her equally. Years went by, and they still came together now, years after it all ended, and she couldn’t imagine ever loving anyone the way she had loved him. She had tried. A married man – another married man – who kept her dangling. More kids, more promises. A decade had gone by. This time her parents disapproved as much as before – but there was always the excuse of poker evenings, Bridge evenings. Then she moved out and was free for a while.

And so, it began again. Clandestine meetings on odd evenings,

meeting him at conferences he was attending. A year like this. Then her father died. She moved back home.

'I can't see you for a while.' She was flaming angry. Angry at losing her father to a heart attack, he was only sixty-nine, her mother widowed at sixty. And angry, so damn angry at Nic, Nic calling late at night, whispering into the phone so that Penelope wouldn't hear him, angry at scared Nic, so angry at the fact that she couldn't get rid of him, couldn't shut off the switch, the button. Couldn't turn him off like a movie become boring, and unpleasant.

'I can't see you ever, ever again. That's it.' She told him late at night over the phone. She was busy arranging her mother's life, filling her mother's empty hours with suggested activities. Life flowed on, eating away at her days. At first, she was so busy, and still, she admitted, so angry, that she didn't miss him at all. She went away on her annual two-week break to the South Coast with friends, and that was that.

The December break led to a new year and something seemed to cut away from her. She accepted this, her life, she realised. A job as a secretary in a big company that manufactured TVs, radios, fridges and sound systems; two weeks at the coast in summer, a week off in winter. She played cards for money, entered tournaments. Life was safe, safe in the way she had always longed for it to be safe. Safe, secure, comfortable, predictable if you analysed it. But she was getting on too and had no patience for the cut and parry of new relationships, getting-to-know-you dinners, sly shy evenings of removing your clothes and wondering where this one was going to lead.

She didn't hear from him. She heard about him – as he, no doubt, heard news and rumours of her and what she was doing. The children were young adults now. This was the time he would have left his wife, or so he had promised. She wondered if he would have, in the end. She now doubted it. Was she finally getting to know him better? Was she finally getting to know him?

Then, on her fiftieth birthday he called. Ten years later, she said. She was delighted to hear from him. The cycle began again. As it did, as it always did. This time he took her to Greece, two weeks in Greece on an island where no-one would find them. Years later, she remembered this as a time of magic. Lazy days in a whitewashed village, tinged by the certainty that this time he would end it.

Then the words again: Penelope still needed him; his parents were still alive, this would have an impact.

* * *

You can't believe in love at first sight unless you've felt it yourself. Unless you've stood at the door watching him come up the stairs, leather jacket on his masculine shoulders, a cigarette smouldering in his lips, and that wide-eyed smile he reserves for you. You understand the concept of now, of living now and only in this moment, all you have is now.

She'd felt this way the first time he had bounded up the stairs of her parents' home. She was seventeen and he was nineteen and all that mattered was that moment. Her parents liked him immediately. They took to him as a second son, more so. For this second son was brighter, more handsome than theirs. He became a part of Friday evenings at the Rosenbergs; that year after high school they went on holiday together with friends. She took a secretarial course; he finished his university degree in business, poised to take over his father's firm.

He graduated; she too graduated, she from secretarial college and she started working. It was the middle of the sixties, miniskirts made their way to conservative South Africa, and beehives grew higher. In photos, Cleo and her friends would wonder how they had thought they looked good this way, but back then the false eyelashes and high

hairdos were the height of glamour and beauty.

And then, one day, she was twenty-three and he had just turned twenty-five. Cleo had become as much a part of his family as he had of hers. She was invited to his holiday home every year; his sister became her best friend. They had been together nearly six years, six years in which each still lived with their parents – even though friends of each had married and set up home together. Some part of them was waiting, waiting silently. Neither was given to much introspection. Life happened as it did, it was enough to go along, to catch those moments of happiness. The future was out there somewhere, but in the meantime there was fun, there were parties.

‘Dad wants me to start taking over,’ he said one night. They sat outside her home, in his car, sharing a cigarette before she went in.

‘That’s great, Nic. Do you feel ready for it?’

‘Ja, I think I do.’

‘When?’

‘He wants to announce it at the next annual meeting. But Cleo ...’

‘Ja ...’

‘He’s been talking about me getting married ...’

‘Ja ...?’

‘I want us to get married Cleo.’

They had discussed it before, of course. Her parents wouldn’t allow any grandchildren of theirs to be raised as anything but Jewish.

‘We can raise them as both Jews and Christians,’ Nic had said one night after love in the dark.

‘You can’t have Jewish Christians!’ she had laughed. ‘I know, we’ll have a boy and a girl. The girl will be Jewish, the boy Christian!’

It was wildly funny. ‘No, I know,’ he said, ‘we’ll become Hindus and they’ll be perfect Hindus!’

‘Buddhists!’ she yelled.

‘No, Sikhs!’

It ended there; this premature debate on what religion their future children would follow. Now Cleo looked at him, threw her arms around him, breathing in that familiar smell of leather jacket and smoke, and whispered in his ear: 'I also want us to get married Nic.'

* * *

She had felt the lump in her breast ten days ago. The oncologist drew a lump of tissue, confirmed the diagnosis, said with sad and grave eyes, 'You're lucky, we caught it in time.'

'In time ...?'

'We'll do a lumpectomy, then a course of radiation. It's really at stage one only.'

'How long have I got to live?' I'm fifty-nine now, so ...' her words trailed off.

'We have caught it early, we'll have to see, you may go on to enjoy many more years of health. We will test you and if, in five years, you are cancer-free, I am sure you will die of nothing more serious than old age.'

Cancer. The scourge of modern living, she had told him bitterly. 'If you don't get Aids from screwing around, you get cancer. No-one escapes. Now I am going to die from a poisoned breast. Maybe Penelope was right. I should have had children. Don't they say being pregnant or having children gives you protection?'

'Not breast cancer. I think that's uterine cancer or something.'

'Who the fuck cares,' she said.

'Let's go away,' he said.

'You going to be there for me?'

'Of course I am, you know that.'

'No, I don't know that. What's Penelope going to say, if you're caring for me, dying alone somewhere?'

'You're not going to die. The doctor said he caught it in time. They're not even going to remove your breast. You're going to live as long as your mother, longer even. They have made tremendous strides in cancer treatment.'

He'd pay for everything, he said, but first, she wanted to go away, far away from doctors and crime-filled Joburg streets and hijackings and beggars at every corner. He had suggested a week at the coast, but she had found an article about a lodge on an island, at the confluence of three countries. 'I want to go there,' she said. 'I want to look at three countries at once. I want to go somewhere where there's no electricity and the generator shuts down at night, where we'll bump into no-one we know.'

He booked.

* * *

The first words are lost, the subsequent arguments remembered.

'You can't marry Nic,' her mother said. They were eating breakfast together in the dining room, 'My god, Cleo, what were you thinking?'

'Daddy?' Cleo said turning to her father in his blue tartan dressing gown. Saturday morning, but he was going into the office later.

'Your mother's right, Cleo honey. You can't marry Nic. You know that. You've always known that.'

'Why? Why? Because he's not Jewish?'

'Cleo, we can't let you marry Nic, he's not Jewish and no grandchild of ours will be raised Christian.'

'We've discussed all that. Our children will be raised as Jews and Christians, others have done it.'

'Cleo,' her mother, her adored mother said, 'if you marry Nic, that's it. You won't be welcome in this family again; we won't have a daughter anymore. Let's hope Nic's family will be accommodating,

because that's all the family you'll have, My parents didn't die in the Holocaust so that you would marry a Goyim!

She was in tears as she left the room, Cleo staring after her, her father staring down at his coffee cup.

'Daddy?'

'We love you, but we can't let this happen. Don't break our hearts. Do what's right.'

'Why did you let me go out with him then?'

'You never seriously thought about marrying him did you?'

'He's the only man I have ever loved.'

'You'll love others.'

'I won't.'

'We all learn to love other people, Cleo, that's life.'

'What do you mean?'

But her father was already getting up from his chair.

'They threatened to cut me out of the family business, cut me out of the will. I'll have nothing Cleo. No money, nothing.'

'We can start over. You can build your own business.'

'It's not that easy.'

'What are you saying, Nic?'

'Nothing, Cleo. I'm just saying that if I marry you that's what they said. I have to think this out. I have to find a solution. Look at what your parents are saying.'

'I can't believe this, Nic. In all these years they haven't said anything bad about you. They accepted you as part of the family. Not once.... I knew that they would have preferred it if you were Jewish, but I thought, I just thought, we'd work it out. I love my parents Nic, I can't believe this, but I also can't live without them. What now?'

Back and forth, back and forth. By now they were furtively sneaking around in order to see each other. They had endless conversations

on the telephone at night, hurried lunches by day, picnics in a park on Sundays. Back and forth, back and forth. Nic's parents were adamant: they'd disinherit him if he married Cleo. They loved her like a daughter, but she wasn't Greek, and she wasn't Christian, and she wasn't, they knew, going to convert.

'We're not going to have Jewish grandchildren,' his father said.

'It's all about the future grandchildren,' Cleo and Nic told each other.

'What if we don't have children?' he asked.

'I want children,' she said.

Back and forth, a tennis match that could not be won.

Then there was the incident with the gun. One night Nic showed up, determined to take her out, there would be no more sneaking around. Cleo's father got his gun out. Normally kept under the lock and key, he had it cocked and ready when Nic showed up.

When he bounded up the stairs, hair slicked on his boyish face, wearing a new blazer, Cleo's father was waiting for him at the door.

'If you ever come near my daughter again I'll kill you!' He pointed the gun at Nic, 'You understand? Don't call her, don't even think about her. It's over.'

Cleo watched him leave, flowers in one hand, body drooping. He climbed into the driver's seat, then reversed. Cleo watched as he got out of the car, placed the flowers on top of the post-box and glanced in at her watching from her bedroom window.

Later, she picked up the flowers, red roses, and put them in water in a vase he'd given her years before.

It was ten years before she saw him again. Ten years before she saw him at a party, a pretty Greek woman beside him. His wife, small, dark and Greek. Not tall, blowsy and red-haired as she was.

And now, close to forty years later, she lies on an island hearing the waterfall in the distance. It's late. The day, a full one, of fly fishing, lunch, talk with a the elderly Italian professor of science, out on her annual African holiday – 'I always spend a few days here' – a water safari, cocktails ordered around a deepening night, and supper at a large wooden square table. To all here, they are Mr and Mrs Xenopolous, as they are so frequently when they travel. A fake wedding band around her finger.

'How long have you been married?' the Italian professor asks.

'Nearly forty years,' Cleo says. 'We married when I was twenty.'

'How wonderful. I never married, myself.'

'We were teen sweethearts.'

'Do you have children?'

'We have four children,' Cleo smiles proudly, looking over at Nic, who is in animated conversation with the lodge owner. 'Three boys and the last, a girl.' Thinking, I'd better let Nic know that we now have four children and have been married nearly forty years.

Now, lying on the bed, waiting for him to come back to the tent, she remembers that she didn't tell him. That the Italian woman might still be there with him, still talking, asking him about his children. Automatically he'd be telling her about his real children, two children, not four. Perhaps, if asked, he'll look surprised, bluff his way through Cleo's lie, realising what she has said. It won't be the first time.

She looks over at her watch, why hasn't he come to bed? One more night, and they fly home, and back to Johannesburg for Cleo's operation on Monday. Who is he talking to? Doesn't he realise they have so little time now?

In the bathroom adjoining the tent, Cleo washes her face of the day's sweat. Canvas flaps above the room. Leaves have fallen onto the floor, carpeting the bathroom in patterns of green and yellow. The light here is dim and flattering, she looks younger than the sixty

she'll be next year. Perhaps fifty, that's right, she could, she often does pass for fifty.

'You can have any man you want,' her mother had said, months after the break-up with Nic.

'You've never felt resentful towards your parents?' a friend had asked once, hearing the story.

'I've always adored my parents,' Cleo had replied. 'They've always wanted the best for me.'

'But ...' the friend had faltered, 'but they stopped you from marrying the man you really, really wanted to marry.'

'They wanted the best for me,' Cleo had replied.

'But you never met anyone else after that, I mean, who meant as much, whom you wanted to marry.'

'No, I didn't. I met other men, had other relationships. No-one compared.'

'But you could have had it all.'

'No, no I couldn't. And the kids, you can't raise kids as half Jews, half Christians. You have to choose, it's not fair to them. So, you see, it couldn't have worked out. My parents knew what was best for me after all.'

* * *

Nic stands at the entrance to the bathroom, staring at Cleo through the mirror.

'Did you have a good time?' she asks him, looking at him through the mirror.

'Yes, okay.'

'Who were you talking to?'

'That Italian woman, fascinating stuff. Heard about our four kids by the way. Thanks for warning me, hey.'

'Sorry. Thought you'd figure it out.'

He comes towards her, 'How are you feeling?'

'Fine, thanks. Just fine.'

He grabs a towel off the railing, wipes his face.

'Nic?'

'Yes?'

He looks at her, he looks worried, creases between his brows, and he looks so tired.

You have to choose, she wants to say. You have to choose, I may be dying and now you have to make a decision. Will it be me, or Penelope? Choose. This is your last chance.

'I love you,' she says to his concerned face. 'I have always loved you. I always will.'

'I know,' he says, 'I know.'

The words sound soothing, but flat.

She takes the towel from him, places it back on the railing. Looking down she sees the basin is strewn with leaves again.

A man sits in a Johannesburg park

A man sits in a Johannesburg park on a late summer's afternoon. He releases the lead attached to his spaniel's collar and she bounds off to sniff trees and play near the river, perhaps she will even go for a swim again. The man will then take her home and turn the hosepipe on her, washing off the slime of the river water. The man's name is Andrew Barker, a good ordinary enough name, a solid name that is easy to pronounce, easy to give over the phone. It's an afternoon late in the week. The man is alone. His wife and children are packing, and this is the dog's last run in his company. Tomorrow he takes her into six-month quarantine.

It's hot, midsummer and Andrew's face is red as he sits and waits for Lucy to finish bounding through trees and river. He sits, waiting, quite tired all of a sudden. He's escaping the claustrophobia of the

house, now almost emptied of furniture. His wife and children packing suitcases, still busy throwing out black plastic bags of rubbish, and still anguishing over what should not be thrown away. And Lucy, running through the litter of lives being packed up, tongue lolling to one side, excited, excitable.

‘I’ll take her to the park,’ he had told Deborah, his wife. ‘One last time before we take her in tomorrow.’

He hadn’t planned on doing it. There was the packing to do, and then there were friends coming to take the rest of the furniture off their hands. One last night in the house they have lived in for ten years: one last night with a camping bed for him and his wife and an old futon for the kids. In the morning they will leave it on the pavement and it will be gone soon enough. A last night with no TV, no pots and pans, just takeaway dishes and memories surrounding them in the hollows of the house.

Tomorrow they will stay with friends, and on Sunday these same friends will take them to the airport. Tomorrow Lucy will start her quarantine and Andrew just hopes that she passes all of Australia’s stringent tests and that they don’t find some strange disease lurking in her ticks or blood. If they do, there’s a plan for that too: the friends who will take them to the airport will then keep Lucy, reclaim her from quarantine and add her to their menageries of dogs, cats, and a few birds. It’s for the children that they are taking Lucy – a reminder of home, a sense of continuity. Or so Andrew and Deborah have said. Yet, in some way, they also can’t bear to leave her here: Lucy with lolling tongue and puppy-soft eyes, Lucy who is as much a part of their family as their two children. Lucy, who is part of their lives here, and whom they want to be a part of their lives there – a link from continent to continent. It is perhaps a lot of pressure to put on a dog, but, of course, Lucy is delightfully unaware of these pressures as she bounds towards the river.

Andrew sweats in the sun. He sits on a fence of logs, pulls a cap lower over his face, drinks from a bottle of sparkling water. It'll be as hot over there, he thinks, and the seasons are all the same. Christmas will still be boiling; winter will still mark the middle of the year. At least the children won't have to get used to new seasons, snow in December or biting freezing weather instead of sun and sun block.

The Australian accent also isn't that far off the South African one either – foreigners still mistake South Africans for Australians or New Zealanders, that peculiar flattening of the vowels. The kids, a boy and a girl, have been reading books about their new country: children's guides to life in another place. Learning that Australia is about more than kangaroos and dangerous snakes and vast deserts whose heat eats you up if you let it. Andrew and Deborah have, of course, been reading other sorts of guides: *Culture Shock Australia*, how to set up a business, newspapers which list the price of houses, schools, cars, furniture and food. Night after night for months the TV has stayed off as Andrew and Deborah have devoured books, marking the pages with fluorescent orange and green and yellow post-its. Drowning in information.

'I feel like we've already left,' Deborah said a few nights ago as she sat putting tape over the last few boxes.

Andrew had sat down beside her, trees rustled outside the lounge window.

'But we haven't,' said Andrew. Then, softly, like a traitor: 'In some ways I wish we weren't leaving.'

'You've said that before and I know what you mean and I also know that you don't mean it,' replied Deborah, mouth in a straight line, pinched red.

'Yes,' said Andrew, as the doorbell chimed, yet more friends coming to buy yet more furniture.

It was, now, a closed subject. Whatever Andrew wished, or the

kids wished, or even Deborah, the decision had been made. You had to make decisions, stick with them, you could not spend years wondering what to do, whether to do it, and all the while the rand was sliding downhill, and the kids were growing older, and was there a future now for them here? No, debates were useless, you had to make a decision and stick to it.

And so it was that the house was sold, boxes were dispatched, furniture divided among friends and relatives. All the physical signs were in place. You resigned from a job, took the kids out of school. You got tax clearance certificates organised; you cashed in a life insurance policy. You did all this because a decision had been made: you did not question anymore whether you wanted to do this, or what it would all mean in the end. You became a robot; you tied up the ends of your life as neatly as possible.

In a sense though, the decision had been made for them, almost in spite of themselves. They had applied for papers and waited over a year to be approved. Then, all too suddenly, they were approved and they had held the official documents in their hands that said they had so many months to take up the offer or it would lapse, and they would have to reapply, wait yet another year or so.

They had been half-hearted about the idea now – after all this time of waiting, deciding, applying ‘just in case’ as they told friends, family. That night they sat at the kitchen table while the kids played games on the computer and they laughed at the papers. Both slightly tipsy on wine now, Deborah smoked a rare cigarette; smoke curling into and around her dark head. They were laughing, with relief, with indecision, with the enormity of the decision to be made. They were comfortable now, in their cosy kitchen, warm with wine, love, familiarity. For though they had been married for years and years and had two children, they still loved each other as deeply as in the beginning, perhaps more so.

'I don't know now, Andrew, I just don't know. I can't say we should go. But I can't say we should stay,' Deborah said on that night, months ago, as winter was just edging into spring.

'What do we want to do?' Andrew replied absent-mindedly. 'What do we really want to do? We shouldn't go just because so many of our friends are going or have already gone. That's not a good enough reason to go ...'

'Like we're going because what's wrong with us? If friends are going they must sense something, know something that's passed us by. We don't want to be left here, stupidly clinging on to something that's finished. We're still young enough to make new lives for ourselves. And the kids, Thomas is only eight, he'll be speaking Ozzie before we know it and Tara is adaptable.'

'She'll be eleven soon ...'

'Yes, and she'll miss her life here more than Thomas. But think of the future, their future.'

'It's hard to leave though. You don't just leave Africa. It pulls you back.'

'Not if you don't let it,' said Deborah.

'I feel like I belong here,' said Andrew. 'I feel like I know the place inside out, I'm a part of it. When you grow up on a farm and watch what the seasons do to the earth, the animals, you become a part of it.'

Sharply now, Deborah said, rising from the table, 'I'm the one who's going to have to give up her career. Let's not get sappy and sentimental about this. You're just going to go ahead and carry on flying aeroplanes. It won't make any difference to you at all, except your layovers will be in different places. I'm the one who will be trying to start all over.'

She just about flung her wineglass into the sink, storming out to tell the kids it was bedtime soon. Deborah was a lawyer, her years

of studying would be useless there. She couldn't see herself going back to study – even if the kids were older. Studying for a new career wasn't something you did when you emigrated. They had discussed options: PR, a half day job as a receptionist if she could get it, time to be with the kids and time enough to integrate into society by working. Andrew, of course, would be fine. Qantas already wanted him.

But then the decision was taken out of their hands, made for them, they would say after. Andrew was away when it happened, and he'd curse about that, after.

It was banal almost, recounting the events. This was not an original story, and all those they told had heard it before, had read it before, or had even experienced it. The glass shattering, the faces at the bedroom door in the middle of the night, Deborah's hand already on the panic button, heart thudding as a hand was clamped over her face. They didn't rape her, and except for a dislocated arm on Thomas's part they didn't really hurt the kids. They wanted money, and jewellery, then the car.

There was a moment when Deborah thought she might be raped. It was when the gunman had first burst into her room, tied her up and then had gone rampaging through the house leaving Deborah there, eyes stretched wide open, mouth useless with tape over it that the thought occurred. Deborah never knew how many there were, she thought four or five, crashing through the house, smashing things, glasses, bottles of booze.

The first gunman returned and leaned over her. He pushed her nightie up with the edge of his gun, he grunted, as though language had been forgotten, and moved roughly against her. She smelled him: old sweat and fear, adrenaline, alcohol on his breath, panic. He had the gun beside her head then as he looked at her, nightie raised, no panties. Deborah breathed raggedly, the children? If she just gave in, the children, would they leave them alone? Why couldn't she hear

them? But then another gunman burst in, there were shouts and it was over. They left. There was silence, no house or car alarms going; they hadn't even tried to take the cars.

The security company arrived. They had keys. Perhaps the gunmen had heard them coming?

They too burst in, releasing the kids who had been locked up in one of the bedrooms. Downstairs was a mess, it smelled like a brewery with all the broken bottles of booze. They had taken very little: some money from Deborah's purse, a DVD machine, but not the TV, and, they had taken food. The fridge and freezer were bare, frozen meat, salad, bottles of HP and tomato sauce and more were all hauled away in rubbish bags. It was surreal. Deborah would joke weakly in months to come, that the gunmen were hungry, but the joke was flat.

Still she had been lucky, they all agreed. She hadn't been raped and the kids were fine. There were worse stories: of being held at ransom for hours, of husbands watching as wives were taken away to be raped, or being forced to watch the rape, helpless, tied up.

And they were alive. They hadn't been shot and no one had died. At times Deborah almost felt like she had no right to complain: they hadn't taken much at all, hadn't hurt her ... she almost felt like she should shut up, thank her lucky stars and get on with it.

Except she dreamed of gunmen, of guns caressing her thighs, of men with dark, crazed eyes, over and over again she dreamed. And there was Andrew, who raged at himself, livid, because he had been away on one his flights. The dog, Lucy, had been of no help. She had been at the vet that night and thank God they said, or they probably would have shot her.

The security company apologised for not responding immediately but they just didn't have enough cars to send out. And the police, when they arrived the morning after, gave her a case number, shrugged their

shoulders and implied that they too thought she had been lucky and had nothing to complain about. They hadn't come the night before, and no one could say why. They too had a lack of cars, they said, they couldn't be everywhere.

And so, they decided. They argued and debated and justified their reasons over and over again: 'I'm not going to wait until next time, I'm not going to wait until I am raped in my bed,' said Deborah, 'or when Tara is raped. I'm going before that happens,' she said to friends at dinner parties, at lunch, to colleagues at work when asked about her decision. 'Crime, crime, crime,' she said. 'One word: crime. I'm not going to be around for a next time when the government has no intention of doing anything about it. They won't even acknowledge that there's a problem.'

She was loud now, unapologetic even as she knew that their decision to leave was frowned upon, she was one of those whingeing whites politicians flayed in parliament. This country had bred her and looked after her and she had benefited from the fruits of apartheid and she should stay, grit her teeth, see the bad years out. One day this country would be gold. She recalled how, at a breakfast meeting at work, a woman had asked her, sotto voice, looking nervously around before she asked, if Deborah and her family had ever thought of going. Equally sotto voiced, Deborah had said yes, nodding with eyes downcast. Now her eyes weren't downcast she was angry, vociferous.

And there was Andrew, helpless with rage and fear himself, wracked with guilt for not having been home that night, desperate to do something even as he talked of his love for the land. They went to his parents' farm, the place he had grown up and as they talked it over with his parents Deborah let herself see the tug of war in him.

He rode horses over the farm, took the kids to secret pools and places he had played in as a child himself and Deborah could see

the thread that bound him to this place, this land, his parents, to a place where the light was white hot and blinding.

‘Leave,’ his parents counselled. ‘If we were younger we wouldn’t bring up kids here, it’s just too dangerous now, and what’s waiting for them when they leave school?’

Shocked, Andrew had argued, ‘But how can you say that? You won’t see your grandchildren more than once a year maybe? You’ll grow old you might not be able to fly out to see us then.’

‘It’s not about us,’ his father said. ‘It’s not even about you and Deborah anymore.’

‘You’re not just giving us your blessing, you’re actually telling us to leave,’ Andrew had said, shaking his head, disbelieving.

But they were in a grip of a decision, and as they went through the days they shed possessions like snake skins, wondering if they would really need so much in their new lives. They knew they would have to need less: they would be surviving on one salary for a while and they wouldn’t be able to afford the same large house, but comforted themselves with other thoughts. ‘You’ll be able to sleep safely at home now, even if I am away,’ said Andrew. ‘You won’t need burglar bars and security alarms and rape gates over the doors. And you won’t worry about being hijacked every single time you come home, day or night ...’

‘I can’t imagine not having burglar bars, Andrew. I still want them, I don’t think I can sleep now without them.’

‘And,’ Andrew continued, caught up, ignoring her last comment, ‘you can walk in the streets, you can walk to the shops instead of having to always drive everywhere and we’ll be living by the sea.’

Deborah saw the sea in her mind’s eye, the Sydney Harbour Bridge arched over the deep blue of the Pacific Ocean. On their visit to see the place before applying for emigration papers they had done the Bridge Climb, harnessed, slightly scared and exhilarated with the

thought that they might one day live here. That's what Deborah saw, herself, on a bridge high up, people like ants, when Andrew spoke of the beach. There was no beach in her mind, no waves and surfs or golden sands, just a bridge over dark blue dangerous waters.

The kids spoke of missing their friends, their grandparents and the farm and they reassured them that they would visit in a year's time. That they would make new friends and it would all be so exciting. It was mostly Andrew who would make the reassurances, Deborah listening as she wondered about their new life.

Andrew felt bouncy and light-hearted: he had handed in his notice and was going to start flying for Qantas even before they left. He was going to fly the South Africa-Australia route as often as possible, for now and in the future.

'You're not really leaving,' Deborah said to him. 'We're leaving, me and the kids, but you're just going to carry on as normal, except your home will be in a Sydney suburb not a Joburg one.'

'So?' He was defensive. He had done everything he could: all Deborah had to do was make the move, she didn't even have to get a job until she was ready. Hurt now, as Deborah flung out these barbs, he asked her again and again if she didn't really want to go. 'I don't want to get raped,' she flung at him again and again.

They were tense – but they put it down to the stress of the coming move. They read the books about their new country and showed the children all the places they would visit.

'We'll climb Ayers Rock, we'll visit the Blue Mountains, we'll go all over,' they said.

One day it was as though a light had gone on in Deborah. She strode through the house with something less like fear and anger and something more like lightness and pleasure. She was a woman in her mid-thirties preparing for a new life in a new country, and one day she asked Andrew if he ever thought she would lose her accent, 'I'm

not too old am I? Maybe by the time we're in our fifties or sixties I'll sound like our kids will ... And you, in your fifties too I wonder what you'll sound like?'

Andrew wonders now, sitting on the wooden wall, waiting for Lucy, if that was the moment. When she said those words he remembers feeling icy cold and then raging hot as though he had a temperature. He saw her then, an older woman with white-streaked brown hair, the aged face, and sounding like someone else. He'd wanted to shout stop, don't do it! Fear crept up and down him like blood: Stop, this isn't what I want. But what could he say? *'Don't change your accent, don't ever make yourself sound like another person from another country.'*

Yet he knew her sounds would mangle themselves into a mongrel mixture of the two continents, no matter how unintentional, and that's when he knew. Nothing could bring it alive as forcefully as his wife aged before him in his mind's eye, speaking in a peculiar accent.

But decisions are made and you must stick to them, he knows that as he gets up to look for Lucy. He knows now that the sun will not be the same over there, that it may be as white hot and burny, but it won't be the same white, the same burn, the same green in the grass. Even Lucy will look different, her red coat redder, more intense perhaps.

He knows now, with a clarity that he wishes he had seen before, that it's not that easy to leave your home. You can't just sell your house and possessions, make a decision, buy airline tickets and wave goodbye, simply because that is what your friends and countless strangers are doing, or because your wife was nearly raped.

But what if they bought into a secure townhouse complex? With a 24-hour guard and in a boomed-off area? That would be more secure, why didn't they think of it? Andrew would be less reluctant to fly away every few days and the kids would still grow up knowing this country as theirs, as he did, and enjoying a close relationship

with their grandparents. And their cousins? They will have no one in Sydney. Here, they still have two cousins, Deborah's brother's kids. Her sister lives in Canada with her husband and children. Why didn't they think of other options? Why did they just automatically think of going, grabbing onto that straw offered by another country? Why did they put in papers anyway, despite the not inconsiderable expense? Because well, just in case ... Are they really that unoriginal?

And now, two days before he is due to leave the country of his birth, he sits panic-stricken, knowing that he mustn't, can't, won't and yet will go. Everything hinges on him: Deborah will be dependent on him over there; already it's over there, no longer our new home. He's changed their lives and they are all looking forward to it. If he says no now, then what? He does not lose his job, as Deborah has said, life continues for him, wherever he is, but then what? Deborah will go – if she doesn't go to Australia, she will still go. The house is sold; it will be easy to go their separate ways. That's it. Decisions are made and you've got to stick to them even when you realise they may not be right. If he leaves with her, it's over, he knows, and if he stays, it's over.

A man walks in a Johannesburg park in the middle of summer, calling to his dog Lucy. She's nowhere to be seen. He walks toward the dark green mucky bed of the river and trails a stick through the water, waiting.

The dog will return, as dogs do, wet and excited and excitable, smelling of the dirty buggy water. She will walk home on a leash, the man beside her as insubstantial as a ghost.

Schmalz

In 1781 Emperor Josef II announced an Edict of Toleration for the Jews which established the requirement for hereditary family names. Jews were required to assume German-sounding surnames.

Rivka

Shlomo comes in and says, ‘Here, you’re a Schmalz.’

Thrusts a piece of paper at me – not that I can read it – and says, ‘Look, says it there. You’re a Schmalz. So if you need to tell anyone, not that you will, you tell them Schmalz.’

Schmalz. Grease. Chicken fat. Schmalz! ‘That’s not what Dora and

her family got!’ I go outside, the piece of paper with the scribbles in my hand. ‘They’re Goldfarbers! How did they end up with gold in their name and we’re just grease?’

Shlomo looks up at me, scratches his chin, runs his hand meditatively around his greying beard. He’s scraping some kind of shit off his good leather shoes; he carries on scraping in the weak sunlight, and ignores me. He’s hoping I’ll shut up, go away; runs a stick through the shit.

I hold the piece of paper under his nose, ‘How did we become Schmalz and Dora is a Goldfarber and Rosa and her family are now Diamond?’

Shlomo sighs, as he does in these types of situations, and says I must look after this piece of paper, whatever I may think of it, or the name; we must keep it safe. He tells me to put it in the family Torah, so when the tax inspectors come we know where to find it.

Inside I find Sarah sitting at the window, sewing something as usual; it’s the only way we get any meat in this household, through Sarah’s sewing. What Shlomo and I can get for our small efforts only keeps the roof over our head. I deliver the babies when I am called, but I’m not popular, and Shlomo’s just a teacher, really.

I get the book, fold the paper into four, tuck it into a pouch at the back. I stand behind Sarah, quick hands weaving in and out of the ivory fabric.

‘You’re a Schmalz,’ I tell her, ‘You’re Sarah Schmalz. That piece of paper says so.’

But Sarah doesn’t stop, in out, in out, the needle flashes, quickly, a line of neat, quick stitches ... how many handkerchiefs can she sew in a day? How many dresses a month? Her father comes in, hands holding the leather boots, now scraped clean. He sets them down by the stove, goes into the bedroom to change out of his good clothes. I wait, wait, wait, till I know he must be back in his day clothes, the

good shirt hung up for the next time. I'm right, he's sitting on the bed, rubbing at his feet, socks still good, no doubt because of Sarah's darning. I pull the curtains dividing the room shut.

'I put it away,' I tell him.

'Good, good,' he nods wearily, eyes still avoiding mine. 'What does it matter Rivka? It's not your real name? It's not your Jewish name, it's a name for the world, for the gentiles. What does it matter if you're Schmalz or Gold, whatever. Hymie couldn't pay either. You know what is? He's a Taschengreifer!'

We laugh, Shlomo could always make me laugh! Hymie and his no-good, money-grabbing wife, Hilda, now named pocket grabbers! This is good. No way can Hilda go past me in the street now with her haughty eyes. Looks down at me, even though she's shorter than me by inches. A pocket grabber!

'What else?' I ask.

'Well,' he says, 'David and Leah are now Drachenblut (dragon's breath), and Saul and Muriel are now Plotz, (to die), and Amos and Yenta are called Drek, (shit!)'

We howl with laughter, I hit the bed with both hands, scream to catch my breath. What must the neighbours think! Bang, bang goes the wall. It's old man David, as usual, so deaf you have to have to shout at him a hundred times if you want him to hear you, and yet, make a tiny squeak in bed and he bangs on the shared wall. It's a ploy, I always say. You have to repeat everything and so you end up staying longer with him, otherwise you'd yell your greetings and go.

I sit up, stare at Shlomo. 'And why haven't you told me what they're called?' I gesture with a thumb toward the dirty grey wall that separates us. Shlomo sighs again. I know that sigh. 'Rivka, Rivka, but these names don't matter. You know that ... it's only so the gentiles can keep track of us and make us pay our taxes. That's all. It's not who we are.'

I stand. 'Shlomo? What are they?'

'They're the Rosenblatts,' he sighs again, scratching his chin.

'I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!' I storm out, Sarah is still sitting at the window in her chair, sewing as she has since she was a child. She looks up at me, startled. I roar, I know I am roaring and must stop and cannot. 'They're the Rosenblatts!' I bang the lid of a pot closed. The noise rings in the room.

'Mamma,' Sarah finally puts down her sewing, 'But it doesn't matter Mamma, you know that. It's only a gentile thing, we're not what they call us.'

Sarah tries to touch me and I shake her off. I stand by the stove, filling a pot with water and peeled vegetables. She knows I wanted to be a Rosenblatt, she knows it. I thought the name was so pretty, rose leaf, if you have to have a surname, why not make it pretty, special? I begged Shlomo, I begged him day and night and no, he wouldn't cough up. 'They'll give me what they give me,' he said. 'I'm not paying for a name I don't even want and that the synagogue won't even recognise. You're mad, Rivka, mad. You want me to throw away good money on this, and then we don't eat for a month? We'll get what we get. Besides, if I had the money you think I would spend it on a name?'

A few coins, and you had a good name, a nice name, a name you could be proud of. But I was the only one, the others didn't care. They didn't know why I cared either. Everyone said it: it's not your real name Rivka, it's a name for others, you think the Rabbi's going to care what you're called? You think anyone is even going to remember it? Ah, but they will, they will. You think the neighbours aren't going to throw it in my face that they're the Rosenblatts? Or that Tovah isn't going to remind me that she is now named for a beautiful sparkling stone and I'm nothing but grease in a pan?

I turn around.

Shlomo slopes out, hunched shoulders, deep grooves on either side of his face. Shlomo, my Shlomo, the failure. Couldn't even make it as a Talmud scholar, has to teach the Torah instead to spoiled Jews. And couldn't even get me a decent name. That's all, a decent name so I can finally hold my head up high. Can't get me a decent place to live, so that we're all squashed in here with the younger children sleeping by the stove to keep warm, and Sarah sewing all day. Already her eyes are ruined. You think I don't see how she strains, holding the cloth so close, always near the window for light, and already nearly twenty! Twenty! At her age I was married and had a child already, Sarah it was who I had then.

And look at her, scrawny like a chicken in the cooking pot and screwing up her eyes and not caring she hasn't got any meat on her bones so that she can get a husband and get out of here.

* * *

Shlomo

Shlomo walks. Walks to the lessons he's giving. Summer's coming, the light's brighter, he's even beginning to sweat. Rivka will have something to say about that, about having to air his clothes outside and washing them more regularly.

He lumbers. He knows he lumbers because he's been told so, and he feels like he lumbers, like he's heavy on his feet even though he's not a heavy man. A bit more weight on his stomach than he used to, but not heavy, no. No longer skinny Shlomo, as he was as a youth, but still ... He lumbers, he thinks, because it's hot, or it's cold, or because when he gets home Rivka will have something to say, about the sweat staining his shirt in summer; or about the fact that Sarah is still home unmarried, a burden, about where the money is going to come from for this, or that.

The money.

Shlomo feels he'd be a younger man if there wasn't always the money to think about, the food, the clothes, the lessons. Always the lessons, giving extra classes to boys who won't make it through their schooling if he doesn't arrive, clutching his books, twisting his beard, ready to show these boys with parents who have more than he has, why this happened in the scriptures and what it means, and what prayers do you say if the food is milk or wheat or just a mixture of both?

Shlomo can tell them in his sleep, he's been doing it for twenty years, teaching boys, telling different boys the same thing, over and over. His own sons suffer of course, at night; he's tired, half-hearted, wonders why his boys don't already know the answers, why they haven't absorbed them.

Another few streets ... Shlomo wipes sweat off his brow, stares up at the sky, high and bright and blue. It was that business this morning with the emperor's inspectors that has made him so tired. All morning they waited, lined up, the sun getting higher and hotter. Some men paid. They were prepared to do that. It wasn't official, and it would be denied if anyone came asking questions, but they all knew, had known for months, the rumours spreading. First the decree: the emperor had decided all Jews were to have surnames, German surnames.

For years they had been able to get away with it, even as the gentiles had acquired surnames. But the emperor had decided.

It will make it easier to take our taxes off us, had been old man Isaac's assessment. A cousin of Rivka's, Isaac was fifty-five now, stooped, white-haired, his rheumy blue eyes overflowing with tears. Isaac had shrugged. It didn't matter what the gentiles had called them, in the end, he said. They were labels; you used them as you used a hat, to shield yourself from the elements, the sun or the snow.

It didn't matter.

When Isaac was called up, he swayed back and forth, wailing, saying he didn't know he didn't know ... again and again. He walked away with the name of Eselskopf, donkey's head, of all names. The clerks could be malicious.

Shlomo stepped up.

'What have you got?' asked the official, a short, fat man, his face already perspiring, eyes crinkling up in the folds of his face. His cheeks streaked with veins.

'Nothing,' Shlomo had replied.

'Nothing!' The man wrote across a piece of paper, 'You want me to call you nothing?'

Shlomo had been silent.

'Here,' said the man, 'Schmalz. Now, whenever you spread some fat on your bread, you'll remember me, this day, this name. For ever afterwards, Schmalz!'

The man was cackling, chins wobbling, he could hardly contain himself.

Nothing. Schmalz. It shouldn't matter. It doesn't matter, and Shlomo wasn't going to waste valuable coins on acquiring a name like rose petals or mountain dew, or some of the names the others were getting for greasing a man's palm.

But, he knew, as he set off for home, with the piece of paper in Christian writing, that Rivka wouldn't let this go. It would be one more lance, one more failing, one more reason for her to thrust in deeper, ram it in, that he was a failure. She'd never said it – a good Jewish woman wouldn't – but he knew that she wished she had never married him, that she had found someone else, with more money, more guts and courage, more more more ...

Shlomo stops, takes off his black hat, sweats dripping into his eyes, the sun is getting hotter. An early summer they'll have. He's at

the house, goes in, gives lessons. The afternoon passes quickly. He's not really there, yet doesn't need to be. Recites the lessons, the boys recite back. The time passes, dusk becomes darkness and Shlomo will trudge home. As he has a thousand times before, more. How many days does twenty years of marriage hold? How many nights?

* * *

Rivka

We had a day at the lake. Took a cart, took a whole morning. It was the start of summer, just like now, hot, so hot. Shlomo had some extra money, he'd worked harder, paid more and he came in one day and surprised me. Just like that, no warning, I would have preferred a bit of warning. But no, comes in, one Sunday morning, he's hired a cart, picks up the children, shows them what's outside, and I pack some bread and chicken, and we go. The children pick berries off the trees as we go, the cart is slow, the mares old.

The children whined and fought with irritation and excitement. A whole morning away! They had never been this far from the village! I went once, as a young girl, Shlomo took me then too. Eighteen, I was. We were just married.

My younger sister, Mashka, married at sixteen already, and there I had been an old maid, a disgrace. I was unmarried, my younger sister already pregnant with her second child. I couldn't show my head in the street.

Schlomo wasn't born here. Lost his parents in a famine in Russia, wandered around with his brothers. I didn't need details, didn't need to know why or how. He came, an orphan, pale and skinny, with his face sunken in. There has been no one, no one. He came, he made friends with my father. I was married within six months.

I knew.

I knew what the others said. I knew the pity. But now I could hold my head high, I could walk down the street with a scarf over my head as a married woman. I had respect. Two years later I birthed Sarah. She was ripped from me by force after days of labouring. We nearly died. She was too long and skinny; I blamed Shlomo for whatever lurked in his family.

Our sons at intervals after.

Then nothing. He turned away. Mamma died, Papa soon after. My younger sister, plump from all her years of bearing children, seven by then. Face as rosy as a peach, happy, laughing, smiling. And now she was round with her eighth child. I attended her, as I did with all the others.

We had a marvellous time at the lake in the beginning. Never had the children seen such a big body of water, shimmery blue. Cold as ice in early summer – why couldn't Shlomo pick a time when the water would be warmer? They dipped toes in. We ate. Half the village had come too it seemed, carts laden with food, with children. It had been planned for months, but Shlomo hadn't told me. All I had to offer was bread and chicken, some eggs. I felt so ashamed. My sister Mashke, big and round, throwing her good fortune in my face like a dirty rag. So pleased with her husband and children. A big bustling family.

And the questions! The questions people ask when you're on holiday at a lake! 'Why aren't there more, Rivka?'

'Don't know how to do it anymore?'

'Does your man need a lesson?'

Sly. Winking at each other. Three children! Three! That's all we had managed and I was becoming an old woman, thirty, thirty-five, the years reached for me.

'We have to clear your cobwebs!'

These hysterical women shrieked like geese going overhead. And

Mashke, laughing too, her belly grotesque. All my life I have heard this shrieking, this laughter like birds dying.

She ruined the day, as she ruined so many before. Do you know what it's like to be the older unmarried sister? Do you know what people say and how they look at you? Like you have horns sprouting from your face. Like you're contaminated, and you're only eighteen years old.

I took Shlomo when I was eighteen, as one takes old dry meat. I took him. You boil the meat, you boil it and boil it till it falls off the bone, till the string separates from the muscle, till you can eat it.

But it's not the same.

I knew it from the time I was six, seven, eight years old. The knowledge was sour in my mouth. At the age of ten I knew. Mashke was eight by then, with curly red hair. A cute girl. I was no ugly duckling, with my long dark hair and my perfectly shaped eyes, but that didn't help. Beauty or no beauty, they avoided me, avoided me they way you do a dog with a frothing mouth.

I tried. How I tried. I gave them my sweets. It didn't help. I took food from home. They took it all, then ran away. Leaving me hungry, alone. All through the years, helping my mother at home in the afternoons while Mashke was out with her friends.

'Take Rivka with you,' my mother would implore her younger daughter. But Mashke couldn't: 'Then they won't be friends with me!'

Later on, it was just no, shaking her head and then Mamma stopped asking.

Children know. They smell these things as an animal smells fear. They pick it up, a scent. I never smelled it. Just knew. Just knew there was something wrong with me. Occasionally I would pick someone, someone who couldn't smell that there was something wrong, although

they always drifted away. The anger boiling up like in a pot, water frothing with potatoes.

‘Don’t be so mean!’ Mamma said, ‘How are you ever going to find a husband with such a sour face!’ Pinching my cheek, two hard bony fingers, pinching, ‘perhaps the red in your cheeks will make you sweeter!’

Only once she was married would Mashke let the others see us together. The sister with a smell that you could sense a mile away. Something wrong with that one. I looked out of the windows at children playing, trying to learn how to play their games by watching.

* * *

She calls me.

Summer has begun, and the days are hot. You sweat through the long daylight hours, your hair clinging to your face, dripping. Why do people say they enjoy this? This unbearable lack of dignity, no way of getting cool. You wipe a cloth over your face, around your neck. That’s it. How can you stay cool?

I know immediately. She’s uncomfortable, sweating, wanting this pregnancy to be over.

I’m alone.

‘No apprentices?’ she asks, grunting slightly. It’s tradition that a daughter follows her mother into midwifery, but Sarah had no talent for it. Fainted at the sight of blood. Had to get apprentices instead.

‘No, they’ll come later.’ I’m gruff. ‘They’re celebrating.’

‘Celebrating what?’

‘Celebrating their Christian names.’

‘Oh that. I’d forgotten. Joseph’s not back yet. I have no idea what name he chose, or what we were given.’

‘That no-good Shlomo of mine got us called Schmalz! Schmalz! Can you imagine?’

But Mashke is gripped already, not hearing me, pain tears through her.

It takes hours. Night comes. Mashke’s husband comes, goes, leaves the labouring woman. I need help. I take Mashke’s older daughter, she’s the one training to be a midwife. She’s attended a few births, not much, not enough to really know.

By daylight she’s still struggling, calling names. The child is nearly ready to be born, then it’s time, she’s ready. She wants to push, I lean in, close, we smell each other’s sweat, breath, her fear.

She has had seven children. It should be easier every time, but not this time.

The baby comes, as I knew she would eventually, covered in the fluids of her birth.

It takes only a few minutes, a few long minutes as I hold her, covering the baby’s mouth and nose. It’s just enough.

Mashke is already crying out: ‘Where’s my baby? Why isn’t the baby crying?’

I let go.

The cry is like a trickle of blood.

* * *

Sarah

She died nine months later, my Mamma. She didn’t know her own name, or where she had come from, soiling the sheets, eating, and then forgetting how to eat. They called me a saint, a daughter of light, God’s angel. They said I had sacrificed so much, that I deserved better. They said this to make me feel better.

Then they brought little Hannah over, Mashke’s soft, drooling child

from that terrible night, a sweeter child you could not imagine.

They named her Hannah, favoured child of God. Hannah, Hannah Freud, the child of joy. That's the name that Mashke's husband came back with. It means joy, and yet joy is so often bitter.

Hannah is smaller than the other children, and with her almond-shaped face and small mouth she could almost be pretty, except for the dull eyes. Mashke needed rest, with all the children growing up, there was no space to look after Hannah, and we had the room now.

I had watched my parents grow old. They say that when you live with people you don't see how time steals them, ruins them, but that's wrong. I saw. I saw from the time I was a girl. I saw my mother harden, like stubborn old fat. I saw her become old. I saw the grey threads in her hair and I saw how one day they threaded through the black like cotton, and then the next time I looked, the grey had taken over. I saw how her jaw creased and dropped. She became old that day, the day Hannah was born. She was always hard, but then she was old and hard, we blamed it on what had gone wrong that day.

I never did marry. Sometimes I blame myself, sometimes not, who could come close enough? Who would want to? She sent out evil, ringing the house like a web, a noose. And then, when she was gone, who would take me. Eyes weak, eyes glued to the material, scrawny. I ate and ate and ate, swallowing lumps of fat and bread, gristle and meat. It made no difference.

And my father, old by then. Silent and old. He never aged though, he was just newly old by the time of the summer of Hannah's birth, and then that was it – a strip of white through his brown hair, that's all, he never grew older. There were deep lines in his face, the grooves never became deeper. He became ageless. He just became more and more tired, more and more silent. I looked after him, my brothers moving out of home, till it was him and me, and always Hannah in a corner, sweetly smiling.

He didn't speak much toward the end. Then, one night, clutching his chest, he died.

My mother died at the end of the winter.

She lingered for months, clutching me at night, her once plump hands now bony and scrawny. She said, once: 'You'll take Hannah.' Just once.

What was she talking about? But her mind had gone.

So urgent, again and again, at night, 'You'll take Hannah.'

Then one night, near the end. It was like she was suddenly clear, the cobwebs dusted away, like she was back from wherever she had been that night. It was as though she had been pretending, and now she was back. She sat up in bed, her eyes cold and clear. Heavy-lidded, hazel eyes that looked at me from a bony, cold sunken-in face: 'Look at me Sarah. Listen to me.'

I looked. I felt the same cold fear that had encircled me since that night and my mother started losing her mind. There was no running away. 'I did what I had to do. You don't do that to a person, make them small and frightened. You don't do that to a person.'

'What do you mean Mamma?'

But her eyes are closed. She stiffened in the night, and the next day she was gone, and later they brought Hannah to me.

Solly Bernstein's story

Solly Bernstein was the second-last child born to Esther and Solomon, who had come from the old country. She in 1897, he in 1902. Their first child, also a boy, had lived until the age of four, and had died of meningitis. The doctors had been helpless against this disease then.

Solly Bernstein stood four feet, eleven inches, and had a twitch which punctuated his speech: every five minutes his right shoulder would involuntarily go up to meet the down-turned corners of his lips. His whole body would prepare for this convolution, before it resided again. No one knew if he was aware of this affliction or simply didn't care.

He dressed in neat suits, under which he wore a good jersey and a thick shirt. His jacket was always buttoned, even if the temperature outside was climbing to sweltering temperatures.

His two dark eyebrows pulled up sharply from his green-grey eyes, now wrinkled, and a gold corner glinted from a back tooth.

He was sixty-four and living in a recently bought flat in a block named Santa Barbara. He was very proud of the name of the flats.

'You can't miss it – it's called Santa Barbara. Isn't that a nice touch?' he told all he met.

Since he had never married, he lived alone. His home was filled with music boxes: some were cheap, gaudy plastic, some were rich, dark wood, but they all opened to a high, girlish giggle that seemed out of place in this bachelor apartment. His furniture was all wood and hard edges against which it was easy to knock your ankles. The books were hidden by glass, set into the massive bookcase. Not novels, he would remind guests.

'Not novels,' he would repeat. 'I don't waste my time on novels.'

There were plenty of scholarly titles: *Great Religions of the World*, *Sufism*, *Buddhism*, *Jesus's Last Years*, *The Tarot*, *Everyday Meditations*, *The I Ching*, *Ancient Philosophy* and so on. They were books that did not allow Solly to consider other people's lives or other possibilities. Not only were novels read by silly women and love sick teenagers, they were dangerous: they let you see worlds you'd never seen and would never see.

His television dated from the time TV first arrived in South Africa in 1976. Next to it stood an old radio from the 1960s with a special TV attachment, manufactured when the country was hanging on its seats waiting to see if a minister was going to let them have this form of entertainment, which was certain to corrupt family life. Of course they didn't get TV, and they all waited again.

Hanging over the packed-together lounge were three enormous, extravagant paintings done in rich oils: restless seas with a farmyard idyll between them. They bore down heavily, making the visitor uncomfortable and uneasy, loomed over by scenes that threatened to fall out of their heavy gold frames. The dining room table was of yellowwood and was covered by a delicate lace tablecloth. Another music box sat on top of it. Two modern posters adorned the walls, all sharp edges, neon yellows, oranges and screaming pinks.

The kitchen was bare and clean. The surfaces were polished shiny and except for an old metal kettle and a single flowered tea cup there was nothing to show that anyone used it. In his bedroom there were photos of the young Solly. One when he had received his BA, and the other commemorating his BSc. He had been an engineer. And in the centre lay his double-bed.

Solly Bernstein had followed his sister to Johannesburg in the late forties, and studied at Witwatersrand University. Later, he took a job in the city, made money and bought a Porsche. He spent his evenings among the friends he had made while studying or working. He went to their weddings, and visited his nieces and nephews when they were born. He had a flat in Hillbrow then. He began to number and place his books, bought good paintings, and enjoyed being young and unmarried. He went to movies with his still unattached friends, had dinner at the homes of the couples, and started to read the occasional book on philosophy or religion.

Periodically, he visited his sister and her growing family, and periodically they fought and she called him names and then he'd stay away for a while. And then he'd come back and take them for rides in his Porsche.

In 1956 his older brother took his new wife and baby and moved to New Zealand. In the same year his elderly parents sold up what

they had in East London and moved to Johannesburg. They rented a dark, pokey flat and made noises about impending weddings and a desire for grandchildren.

It was at one of his friend's dinner parties that he met Edith Rosenthal.

She was recently divorced and was revelling in her freedom. She was twenty-six, drove a car, and had big black eyes in a pale, milky face surrounded by a cloud of curly black hair. She was quiet and petite, and generally did what was expected of her, except for the divorce. Solly liked her very much, and she returned the affection. His friends winked at each other. The next Saturday he and Edith went to a Mozart concert at the Civic Theatre. They had coffee afterwards, and spoke about their lives and background.

'We got divorced because we just could not get on. We married too young, I was only seventeen! And as the years went by we found we had even less in common,' Edith told him. She smiled and continued, 'I still think that marriage can be wonderful, if you don't do it when you're too young.'

Solly grimaced, awkward at the exchange of intimacies, saying nothing.

'And you? You never married?' she asked.

'No, never married. Just never found the right girl!' Solly said brightly.

She nodded, sipping at the tepid coffee. Solly said it was late, they'd better get going, he always had a lot of things to do on a Sunday morning. Edith nodded again, said she understood, and thanked him for a lovely evening. Would he call again? At her door she asked if he'd like to come in for a nightcap. Solly reminded her of his busy schedule as he left her and got back in his car.

The next morning he lay in bed till late, the papers spread out before

him, still undressed. It was noon when he got up to make breakfast. He spent the day in a kind of eager anticipation, tremendously scared and tremendously excited.

They went out a few more times, once to a movie where Edith took up his clammy hand to hold it, but he sat stiffly straight forward, his knees clapped together till the muscles hurt, and coming out of the theatre he couldn't tell what the movie had been about. As a rule, he had stopped attending such frivolous activities, but on the rare occasions that he did he counted on being able to follow the dreadful things; yet tonight he had sat there sweating, while she sat coyly next to him. He was furious. He told himself he'd never see her again. But the next Friday night when he was at his sister's house with their parents, his brother-in-law brought up the subject of Edith. His mother eagerly asked what her name was, and was she Jewish? And how old was she? Solly told them she was divorced and there was a heavy silence while the next course was served, and then his father waved his hand in the air, and said what did it matter? She was a woman, wasn't she? Yes, Solly nodded grimly, she was a woman.

'Bring her to supper then! What are you waiting for?' urged his mother. 'Come next Friday or Saturday, early, and then you can go out together. Let us meet her at least!'

Edith was delighted to meet Solly's parents. She helped Mrs Bernstein in the kitchen, fiddling with the food, fussing over the pudding she had brought for afterwards. Solly sat with his father in the lounge, both sucking their pipes.

'Why did you hide her from us?' Solomon Bernstein asked. 'That's a wonderful looking woman you've got there.'

When Edith came in to announce that supper was served, bringing in the warm smell of chicken soup, they got up hungrily. Solly watched her ankles disappear around the door, followed by her

rounded buttocks, swinging from side to side. It was just a body, he told himself. Nothing more, a body, a useful material body, made out of flesh, it did things all bodies did, and it needed food, and it went to the toilet, and once a month it bled.

His parents liked Edith, and she got along with them. The conversation centred around the presumed prospective bride, they each forgave her the divorce, for Solly's sake. He was proud and pleased with his achievement, watching the contented faces of the Bernsteins. But the more he watched Edith, the more he disliked her. She sat pretty, with her sprayed dark hair, her too-red lips and the conservative dark blue dresses. So sensible and good, trying not to offend his parents, helping his mother serve the food, laughing at the jokes his father told them, and Solly grew angrier and angrier. As if sensing this, his mother gave him more and more wine, until, for the first time since he had left university, he got drunk. The table sped away, everyone fell far back, and he doubted he could walk back to the lounge, and later it was Edith who drove them back to her small cottage. She helped him in, dumped him on her bed, and said she'd make them some coffee. He lay inert on her bed, staring through the blackness at the ceiling, feeling all his tight control disperse in his alcoholic stupor.

When Edith returned she had a tray of coffee, and wore a short frilly nightie. Her legs were stark and bare against the light behind her. Two solid limbs, he thought and lay back once more. He felt something hot and heavy on him, and opened his eyes to find Edith's pretty face leaning above his. She put her tongue in his mouth, and he welcomed the foreign object exploring around his teeth, making his mouth tingle a little. She soon undid his shirt, and took off his shoes and pants and underwear, till he lay there, more exposed than before, watching the stiffness that stood out from him.

She smelled of flowers, he thought, as she bent over him, tickling his face with her hair.

She pulled him over and she was underneath, and sensing his ignorance, she guided him and kissed him, and told him what to do, and felt him in her briefly, quickly. And then he lay back, panting crudely, like a dog. Soon, they fell asleep together.

He woke the next morning, feeling as though someone had kicked him around his head. He heard food being fried in the kitchen. The sheets smelled faintly, and when he saw he was naked, he remembered. He found his clothes, locked himself in the bathroom, and hurriedly dressed, easing a comb he found in the cupboard through his hair. The face staring back looked menacing, the furious expression of the eyes enhanced by his eyebrows, the narrow mouth clenched into a thin, straight line. His chin was rough with bristle.

That was how Edith came upon him when she entered the room carrying a tray with coffee and toast. She put down the breakfast, and stood there, saying nothing, while he put on his shoes and the blazer. He got his car keys, and she followed him out the door, carrying the comedy through.

'Solly?' she asked him as he got in the car, but he refused to see her. She put her hand on the handle of the door, 'Solly! Talk to me!' But he started up the car and reversed out the driveway, determined not to acknowledge her. The last he saw of her was a ridiculous figure, in her short gown, wearing an expression of stricken puzzlement. He laughed whenever he thought of that.

Edith held up this one cold insult to the globe, and found it came away in tatters. It explained nothing and meant nothing. Her little boy had driven away in a huff, embarrassed and awkward. She tried to weep, to show some grief when she thought she had never even seen his flat, he had only seen her cottage when drunk. Their

courting had been conducted only on neutral territory: at a concert, a movie, a tea-room in the country, his parents' flat, overstuffed and overbearing, far too warmly heated for September, with the odours of food everywhere – but she could not weep or feel grief.

Solly bumped his Porsche against a drainpipe when he tried to park it. Examining the dent on the plum-coloured bodywork, he kicked it and made up his mind to sell the machine. He went around with his mouth still clenched, an angry line on his face. He was unapproachable. He was getting older, nearly thirty, there were wrinkles around his eyes and beside his nose. And he forgot Edith, as he knew he would. He felt violated, so he forgot, as he had let other difficulties slip out of his mind; he tucked the reminders into some unreachable place. He started studying philosophies and religions then. He told his family and parents that Judaism was a farce, but they made no comment. They left the subject of Edith alone, and buried it in their own ways.

One day it was suggested that Solly visit his older brother and family in New Zealand. Train and boat tickets were bought (he could not tolerate aeroplanes, he said) and Solly delayed packing. As the days were swallowed up, he grew more nervous, his twitch became more frequent, he dreamed constantly of sinking ships and train crashes, and the night prior to leaving, his clothes lay neatly organised in his wardrobe.

'I'm not going,' he told the family. 'I don't need to go. I don't need overseas travel. I'm far too advanced for that. I see no reason to travel all that distance. It's a waste of good money.' He cashed in the tickets and returned the money his parents had contributed to this trip.

Another year passed. He moved into a two-bedroomed flat with a better view and servants who serviced the block. He had an offer to work in England or France – but he said no. He didn't like the

English, couldn't speak French and was convinced it wasn't worth his time learning the language of a people he regarded as dirty. And anyway, what was the point? All that he needed for happiness was right in himself. He studied more philosophy, and soon the emptiness in him began to fill up with logic and theories and mysticism. He opted for celibacy, and informed friends that he was advanced, he didn't need women. And all the time the hole was closing in, gradually the statements copied from books became his.

When he was thirty-one he was offered a job in Benoni. The noise of Johannesburg was getting louder and nearer, and so he moved, and found a good cheap place in the East Rand town.

When he retired as a civil engineer in the mid-1980s, he moved back to Johannesburg. Dithering around in retirement for a few years, he finally bought a flat in the Santa Barbara block. He packed his belongings fastidiously, numbering each box, labelling alphabetically so he could pack the books in the new flat as he had always had them.

He settled in and found that the old boredom that had arrived when he retired still lingered. He had days and days to fill, various bills and accounts took only a few hours to settle. He kept his desk in permanent disarray to persuade visitors that he was busy and active and enjoying retirement.

Twelve years before he had joined the Freemasons and spent some time at the meetings. Every few months he went to the nearby hospital for a check-up. On odd evenings old friends came over, occasionally he visited others. He hardly used his dull, white Golf anymore, although he took it out every few days to keep it running smoothly. He walked to the shops which were just a few streets away. He purchased vegetables and fruit daily, and then slowly made his way back home. While strolling back, he examined the beadwork and the carvings of faces and animals that the traders sold while they

squatted on the pavement. But he never bought anything from them. He displayed the same show of interest every day, so they stopped looking up when he came. He was an old familiar sight: a short, stocky man, pretending to be busy, and yet plotting time with a desperate desire to kill it. He was a joke on the street: the knitters of jerseys, the sellers of wooden sculptures and the beadworkers watched him coming, jokes pounding at their lips.

Once home he had the afternoons to dispose of. Sometimes he took his car to the post box he still kept at the Central Post Office in town – but he hardly received mail there now, so he knew it was really a waste of petrol. He slept the afternoons away, fidgeting and twisting in his sleep. He sometimes thought he would go mad with the boredom, tired out by the monotony. Life was relegated to a few streets where he lived, a few old friends who had nothing new to say, and the daily necessities of buying fruit and vegetables. He read the newspapers, watched television and attending meetings at the Freemasons.

He knew that he was superior to the vast majority of mankind by virtue of working himself free of religion, and having chanced upon the only true way. He told those he knew or came into contact with about his beliefs, he argued and debated – but he left others alone with what they held to. He had no need to convince them because he felt secure in his position, only more than mildly contemptuous of those who insisted on the trappings and contradictions of religion.

He felt the same way about religion as he did about travel: he did not need it. He had other things in his life: his study of metaphysics, his power of knowing. When acquaintances spoke about their latest trips and experiences with foreign cultures and languages he smiled, sarcastically repeating that he himself did not need to travel.

Occasionally, he came across pictures of exotic islands with clichéd white sands and palm trees and turquoise seas; or a house gasping

under snow in the Swiss Alps and he felt a quick intake of breath, his pulse rose, and he'd flip over those pages, chanting his litany. And besides it was too late, he was too old. The thought wearied him: finding clothes to take with him, disrupting his orderly flat, covering up everything, trusting friends to pick up his post, leaving everything he knew for something unencountered, strange, probably filthy, and anyway, he'd never done it before, and he was too old.

One cold, wet night in May he went to a Spiritualist Church to hear a talk about materialisation of objects. It seemed the man giving the talk could materialise objects out of nothing. Once he had had a flower fly through the air and land at his feet; another time he had seen a shaft of light in the corner which only one other person, a psychic, had seen. It was disappointing, and Solly had heard such stories before – unremarkable, fragmented accounts of the supernatural.

After the talk, there were prayers, the lights came on, cake and coffee were served. A pale colourless man who had been sitting next to Solly got up, and Solly followed him to the refreshments table.

The man smoked a cigarette, looking suspiciously around the hall. He commented to Solly, who stood next to him, holding a cup, that he had been to Smoke-Enders, he was stopping slowly, this was his second last for the day. Solly told him he had stopped twenty years ago, just like that, when he had seen a friend die from lung cancer. Added to that, he continued, he no longer felt the need for personal crutches, like smoking, that did nothing for him, and could only hurt the temple of his body, which he monitored strictly, by following a vegetarian diet and not drinking alcohol.

The man murmured some kind of polite agreement and looked for a way out. He saw no one he knew. He asked Solly if he had been coming to such meetings for a long time. Solly said he had studied religion and metaphysics for thirty-five years and had been to places like this during that time. The man replied that he had

recently become interested in this stuff due to a personal crisis. They introduced themselves, the man's name was Arthur, he was an insurance advisor. He said he had been separated from his wife for nearly six months, and they were considering divorce. But they were stalled, reluctant to end something they had begun with such idealism and ambition.

The hall was emptying, they promised to keep a seat for each other at the next meeting and left, heads bowed in the rain that was slapping the ground.

At the next meeting a psychic asked them to form a circle. She told them to imagine a scene at a cliff or a waterfall. 'Now, try to go behind, and find a peaceful, beautiful place there. What can you see, what do you feel?' There was a pause. 'Here I leave you.'

Solly found a black cave, damp from an underground river that shifted and moved, soaking him. Bats flew, nipping at his ears, huge monstrosities stared at him, swooping at his eyes.

They hurled criticisms at him, insulting him, screaming that he was useless, that he was leading a hollow life, frittering away his time by doing nothing. He opened his eyes, but the room was dark, everyone sat demurely with their eyes closed, with heads bent or pointed at the ceiling. Outside cars went by, briefly flooding the room with the yellow of their headlights.

Solly sat watching this and the people, glancing at his watch constantly. Afterward they went around the circle, most recounted peaceful meditations, and Solly wondered what was wrong with him.

At odd moments he had had the feeling that something wasn't quite right. Confronted with the hours of retirement stretching bleakly ahead, he had felt there was something more, or there could be more.

But the mind that had studied engineering at university and

parapsychology independently stopped at a block when it was turned inward. Now the block had cracks on the corners, and Solly pondered about the life he had led. More often the doubts were trivia tossed aside because Solly knew he was superior to most human beings. He shouldn't think such things because he was above all that.

Arthur was there that night. His slightly stooped body was dressed in a suit, his sparse hair was brushed to cover the bald spot. He had come in late so he did not have a meditation to tell. The others were sympathetic when Solly said he too had nothing to tell. Afterwards Arthur and Solly met up again. They gravitated toward each other, ignoring the faults and dislikes each found in the other: Solly spoke too much, was a bit eccentric and had a head swelled to bursting point. Arthur was rude, he sometimes ignored Solly's remarks, teasing him slightly.

After the meeting, Arthur went home with Solly who was going to show him his books on yoga and self-healing. He took him into the flat at Santa Barbara, opening the door proudly onto the place with its mixture of old and new art and furniture. They sat in the cramped lounge, the artworks leered at them from the walls.

Solly took out his books but Arthur was now only vaguely interested. At the meeting he had appeared enthusiastic about the subject. He simply paged through them now, hardly glancing at the words.

Solly went to pour the fruit juice in the kitchen, and Arthur left the books alone. He observed the crowded room, grimacing at the leering paintings. His eyes darted, taking in the rest of the room's details, but he always returned to the three paintings looking down on the lounge. He leaned back, attempting to be comfortable against the wood and flowered cushions. Solly was taking a long time coming, so Arthur got up to peer at the titles of the books, bored by the selection. He didn't read much, but when he did, he read recent biographies and autobiographies that had been chosen by his wife.

There was a clatter from the kitchen. When Arthur arrived, impatient, Solly had retrieved the scissors he'd used to cut the cardboard juice container, and was putting it back in the drawer. The juice was in a jug on a tray, the glasses were lined up, he was just about ready to bring it into the lounge.

He had his back to Arthur, who came closer. He was taller than Solly, though still a short man, and he leaned over Solly. He put his hands around Solly's plumpish waist, stroking slowly and rhythmically. Solly stiffened, his hands still holding the edges of the tray. Arthur went on stroking his waist, gently moving his arms around the stomach, caressing the potbelly, going back to the waist. Finally he massaged the shoulders, feeling Solly relax, he heard the tray being released, Solly kept his back to him. He continued massaging the shoulders, and started rubbing his back, noting with satisfaction that Solly's body was becoming limp, giving into the feelings and arousal that Arthur's hands were creating.

He turned, bumping against the tray, hearing it rattle with the glasses, and faced Arthur, who smiled, putting his hands around Solly's neck, sliding his hands up and down, lightly touching the face.

'You're enjoying this, aren't you?' he asked, his face at Solly's, the warm breath weak on him.

Solly didn't move. He wanted to go on. Arthur bent down, clasping Solly. They kissed. At first Solly was meek, simply letting Arthur do what he liked, but feeling the tongue excavate his mouth, he joined in, excavating in return. His tongue was a sexual organ, tingling, twisting. It assumed a life of its own, he took pleasure in the new things it was doing. Arthur held onto the loose skin, it was rough and needed shaving.

They kissed for a long time, until Arthur began undoing the buttons of Solly's shirt, discovering a vest underneath, protecting the bulging belly.

They kissed again, and then Solly led them back to his bedroom. A small lamp cast its glow in an obscure corner, but except for that, the room was dark, they could only make out outlines and shadowy substances. They sat on Solly's bed, hurriedly taking off their clothes, dumping them. They looked at each other in the dim light, appraising what was on offer. The grey chest hairs stood out as faint whispers in the dark. Arthur was thinner, but his skin was more wrinkled, it folded over on itself as he sat round-shouldered, hunched.

They kissed again, quickly. Solly could hardly wait, yet could hardly believe he was going through with it. Deliberately and carefully they made love.

Arthur slept soon after, dead to Solly, dead to conversation. Solly lay awake that night, tossing, hot and sweaty, trying to find a cool spot in the bed, sometimes coming into contact with the unfamiliar body.

He noted the time – it was three, then four in the morning. Tiredness drifted around, but he could not fall asleep. He was too disturbed and shaken. When the pale, blue light penetrated the curtains and the birds formed a choir, he slept, heavily.

The next morning Arthur left just as Solly was waking up. He was in a rush, and was abrupt with Solly, saying he'd see him shortly, he would phone. Solly nodded and went back to sleep.

It was late when he finally got up. He lay in bed a long time, just thinking. His mouth was dry, but still he just lay there. Eventually, when he could take it no longer, he went to get water, glimpsing his naked body in the mirror. He hadn't shaved or had a bath, but he felt clean. He put on a dressing gown, and made lunch. He sat in the darkened lounge, the curtains cut off the sun, and ate and drank and sat, remembering Arthur's touch, trying to relive the moments. By six, he still hadn't done anything with his day, or dressed or shaved. Instead he had supper and watched TV. Arthur didn't call.

He phoned a week later, asking if he could come over. Solly agreed. He had been imagining their night all week, embellishing the story, adding and removing details. He was excited now, tidied the flat. Arthur arrived, looking drunk, saying he had had a difficult week with his wife. Now she was wanting to get divorced right away, but she was demanding too much alimony, complaining that she hadn't worked all these years, sacrificed herself to him.

'The usual garbage,' Arthur grinned, perking up a bit. 'Haven't you got a drink, Solly? My mouth's sawdust.'

Solly poured him a whiskey, having one himself. (He still kept liquor in the flat.) He waited for Arthur to say something, anything, about what had happened. He was starting to feel vulnerable. Yet Arthur only went on about his wife, moaning about the 'bitch', the 'whore', the 'old hag'. The hours went by, but Solly said little. He was in awe of this man, or what this man had shown him. He was still absorbing the experience and wanting more. He was subdued and docile, totally under Arthur, tied down by what Arthur had done to him. Then Arthur stopped talking about his wife.

'Why don't we go to bed, Solly? I'm exhausted,' he said.

They made love that night, and on other nights, prompted by Arthur phoning and arriving, the relationship entirely controlled by him. He enjoyed the manipulation, making use of the power he didn't have with other people. And Solly, afraid of it ending, closed his mouth, letting Arthur lead. For the first time ever he was letting someone else rule his life, letting Arthur dictate the hours and what he did with them.

Solly was confused by this strange and wonderful experience in his life, and tried to sort it out, trying to get Arthur to speak about it. But they never spoke about their feelings or what was happening. Arthur would turn up with a complaint, and Solly would sit silent, mumbling polite nods.

Once Solly asked him if he had been doing this for very long, and Arthur laughed, snidely commenting, 'That was a large part of the reason Mabel and I separated.'

Had he had other, Solly paused, searching for a word, wondering what word, 'affairs' before?

'Some,' Arthur said, 'I'm probably bi – didn't know that when I got married though. Probably the marriage brought it on, hey Sol?' and he laughed.

Solly could sense that he was being used – they didn't really like each other. But they hung together out of a common need, like Arthur's marriage. Divorce papers hadn't been filed yet, Mabel was holding on. Arthur was content to let it carry on that way.

Arthur and Solly never went out together, or introduced each other to their friends. Arthur arrived at night, and left early in the mornings. Ordinarily, they would have ignored each other, neither caring about the other. They had no common interests. Arthur stopped going to the meetings. There was nothing to link them. Arthur had only gone to those spiritualist meetings for fun, having had nothing else to do on those occasions.

Nearing seven months it was clear that Arthur and his wife were getting back together. She had forgiven him, assuming a marriage, any sort of marriage, was better than none. If Arthur wanted to go on being gay, then he must, but she wanted to know nothing about it.

'She's a strong woman, my wife,' Arthur said, telling Solly about the new conditions. 'She's got guts, I don't think I could do the same if it were the other way around. In fact, I know I couldn't.' He leaned back, relief and admiration pinned to his face.

Mabel allowed him back that week. Arthur and Mabel moved in together again, both unhappy about their compromises, yet unwilling to see another way out. Arthur dropped Solly to mollify Mabel, and to prove he was serious about the arrangement working out. Later

on, he informed Solly, he could start up again, when enough time had elapsed.

He left Solly surprised and bewildered. His first real love affair had ended. Arthur had never really said it was over, only to cool it for a while, but they both knew it was finished. Yet Solly kept hoping. He continued with the dull tedium of his daily existence, somehow swimming through the boredom and the pain. He often thought about the bizarre relationship they had formed, reflecting that he'd actually had a homosexual affair. But the word was flat and stale; twenty, thirty, forty years ago he had scorned homosexuals, and agreed with his brother-in-law that they should all be locked up like monkeys in cages.

Now he admitted to himself that he was probably a homosexual.

It was a release from the denial and the repression. He had not felt any shock or horror that first night or any other night with Arthur – he had felt at ease, relaxed, like he was doing what he was finally meant to be doing. He did not miss Arthur the person, he missed everything else. But he didn't phone him, although he thought of him constantly. He seldom made the initial move with others. He waited for them to phone. It was a habit he did not think to break.

His life carried on. Retirement was more bearable for the interruption of the affair, but he still felt useless. As time went by he thought of Arthur more and more, afraid to phone, but replaying the scenes in his head, creating new ones. Once or twice he cried, for the first time since he was fourteen, when his father had told him that men don't cry. He cried at night, when it was dark and late. And then he found it happening every night and didn't bother stopping any of it.

Slowly he admitted to himself that just perhaps his life hadn't been so successful. He had never really known another human being

or shared in the lives of other people. He had always felt himself remote and aloof. He hadn't considered this a fault or a failure because the Great Men, supposedly, hadn't shared their lives or had women. Reluctantly he admitted he wasn't a Great Man. He had not worked miracles or walked on water or materialised things from out of the air, despite all his studying. He was old, he had developed sicknesses and age. He hadn't believed in it, but it had happened, no matter how sure he had been. But it had happened, somewhere in himself he clung to old thoughts and influences, and he was just like everyone else. There was nothing very special about him, there never had been. Friends and acquaintances always treated him with hints of jocularly and condescension in their tones. They didn't respect him.

He wondered if he would have realised this if he had not met Arthur, but there was no way of finding out. Had Arthur precipitated it, in fact? Solly thought so, the experience had jolted him – but perhaps he had been ready to be jolted. He had welcomed Arthur and what the man had to give. It had come at the right time. He felt himself to be small, frail, comical. His life remained empty and lonely, he remained defeated.

He would live well into his eighties, he thought, just like his parents. He liked to tell stories of how he would be buried in West Park Cemetery, to be near the 'folks', and how it would be just a short leap from his flat in Hillbrow, when they came to get him. He told the story often, repeating it to the same visitors, again and again, forgetting they knew it off by heart. After small chatter and smiles, they would leave him standing on the curb. He would always accompany them down in the lift, a short man stuffed into too many clothes, looking lost, solitary.

He would wave after the disappearing car and its occupants, lingering on the pavement, despairing at the number of hours left in the day before going up to his flat.

Desire, with borders

It was a type of desire.

It was a desire without love, a desire with borders.

If you shut your eyes it could be any man, no names, just a man, fulfilling what a man is supposed to do. It was a hot February night in Johannesburg and the windows couldn't be opened wide or the cat would get out. She didn't want the cat to get out, her female tabby was a shy frightened thing, easily terrorised by the Toms in the neighbourhood.

And instead of a man with no name, he had a name. An ex-boyfriend, an ex-boyfriend who was now in the process of becoming involved with another woman, yet here they were, naked on her bed, hot, but still close enough for him to roll on top of her, to kiss her, to awaken something.

It had been years since they had parted, years in which they had remained friends. The spark of sexuality had long died, but here they were. If she closed her eyes, he could be anyone she desired; or wanted to make a life with. But instead she closed her eyes accepting it; this newly sprung desire. He was not someone else, he was himself, and she didn't care. Accepting it, holding him.

Now that he was finally on the cusp of moving away from her, involved with another, she clung to him. Holding him. She didn't want him anymore, but she didn't want to let him go. It wasn't even fair to him, and as she held him and was moved by him, she wondered guiltily if what she was doing was wrong. Was she giving him false hope? Destroying his chances of a new life without her, even as she was no longer prepared to love him?

In the end, they stopped. They had no condoms; she was not on the pill anymore. The desire ebbed away as quickly as it had come.

'I'll bring condoms next time,' he said.

She nodded then, but days later, she knew that even if he brought condoms next time, there would be no going back. She'd release him to this other woman; perhaps it would free her too.

* * *

The writer stops tapping at her keyboard. It's not going right. She has a commission to write an erotic short story for an anthology of local women writers, and she's having problems trying to think of an idea, a story that will go beyond sex.

Truth is it's been a while since she has been able to write any kind of story, erotic or not. It's filled her with a quiet raging despair. She's meant to be a writer and hasn't produced anything that has met with enthusiasm, from herself or others in what, how long? Who knows. Rather not count or think about it. The man, the ex, said you go

through waves, periods when you're creative and productive, and other times you must just wait, lie fallow, live, laugh, love, do whatever it is you need to replenish the well.

She wonders idly if she would ever be invited into the lives of her characters. What if she met them, a list of the characters she's created, drinking cappuccinos in a coffee shop, all together. What if they were friends? Of course they wouldn't invite her.

The people she creates are not friends. She doubts she would like to get to know them: a lesbian who kills her lover in one short story, a gay man who is too afraid to live in another, a couple in their sixties, soul mates all life long, and yet the one married to another woman, and they carry on having their clandestine affair. Or the fat women described in one story, eating her way into unhappiness, growing bigger, her face blown out of proportion by the extra weight. No, these are not friends, although it is fun to peer into their world, to muse on the possibility of creating friends, the way you create characters.

They are born, seemingly without your intervention, they live on a page, and you go along with these creations, as oblivious as to the why or how. You're not really an omniscient God: you are not six years old, playing with Barbie, stuffing cloth in front of her stomach to make her pregnant, in total control of her and Ken.

Still, it's there, this anticipation, this idea that you could look in and see them: there, together, perhaps turning to welcome you. Join us, they say, join us, you know something about each one of us, now let us tell you what you don't know, what you haven't written about ...

She did write an erotic story once, at twenty-one. Still a virgin, but she couldn't refuse the commission. So she bought books, collections of erotic fiction, and using what she knew (because she had been groped by now in cars and nightclubs), and mixing it with fantasy, she wrote a story. It had been published, then republished in another

collection. She went at it, making sex a reality before she had had a chance to do so in her own life.

So why now does the writer fling down her pen, or stop tapping, whatever image is most evocative? Why does the thought of describing penises, and the heat of sex, and fingers feeling seem so distasteful? Once she was told her stories were too sexy, too full of it to be published in a collection, and now she cannot think of describing all the bodily acts without wanting to run screaming.

'Sex is private, it's between two people only,' she says prudishly to anyone willing to listen. But sex isn't private: it's on billboards, on magazine covers; it's in most movies. It's a fact of life. It is anything but private: the suggestion is all around.

And yet somehow she has kept away from all this. She started dating after she left the ex-boyfriend, but the effort seemed intolerable. A colleague at work started dating too, after a divorce, and soon after they sat together saying how tired they were.

'I couldn't be bothered,' said the woman, 'instead of meeting another man for another drink in another bar I'd rather just be home, in bed, reading a book.' The woman had divorced at twenty-eight. She was now thirty-four, she desperately wanted to meet someone, and yet, as curiously, she didn't. Had they both left it too late? Must you meet someone in your twenties and then gradually grow old together, retiring happily from the singles scene? But what do you do if you haven't met anyone, and forty stares at you in the face?

But the effort's such a strain, the primping and preening. She did meet a man she liked once, but he was unscrupulously seeing another woman while courting her.

She feels like she has never known the rules of the dating game.

So there is February. She could return to February with her ex – the first time in three years that she has felt desire, that she has thought that she might be able to have sex again. She could mine February:

she could make it even more sexy. Start with the hot night. Take out the bit about the cat: open the windows and let the breeze blow in, the curtains billow.

Change a few details. The man is tall, dark and handsome, actually, he's remarkably like the motivational speaker she met months ago. Dusky, the shoulders broad from regular gym sessions, the muscles rippling beneath the cut-off white t-shirt, the face strong and chiselled. The brow is slightly furrowed at thirty-seven, but that adds to the charm.

And she too can change: she's tall and willowy with narrow shoulders, black sleek hair. Her face too is chiselled, in a feminine way, not sharp or angular, but defined, pretty and defined.

And then they do things to each other in a bedroom, the exes. They forget about the intervening years, perhaps they even re-discover each other. But now it's starting to sound like a Mills and Boon romance.

No, instead she will add stretch marks, and early greying hair; she will add pimples, a balding spot, normally shaped bodies rather than the Hollywood ideal. She'll write about closing her eyes and surrendering, yes surrendering, because that's what it is. It's surrender to the physical: the body's in control, more so than it is ever is. You want it now, you want it more than you've ever wanted it before and you're even prepared to forget about using a condom.

'Pull out at the right time,' you say, but he, sensibly, refuses. He's right, so right, and he's had sex in the time you have been apart. It's only right he use a condom.

* * *

That other woman. She is there.

'Do you think we should be doing this? What would Brenda

think?’ you ask him.

‘I don’t know.’

‘You’d better not tell her.’

‘No I won’t.’

He’s cheating on a woman he doesn’t know very well, but he has been to bed with her, and he wonders if he’ll have a real relationship with her.

‘I don’t know what to feel,’ he says. ‘I don’t know if I am cheating on her or on you!’

He makes her come, gasping out in that old familiar way, reawakening what has lain dormant so longer. He makes her feel sexy.

‘You are still desirable,’ he says to her, now in her mid-thirties, a long way from the years they first met. Then he was in his mid-thirties and she was only edging towards the threshold of the thirties. For once, she feels good naked as she lies there, her breasts just visible in the darkness, the shapes of them, lying back in her bed, the streetlamps illuminating the curve of them, the house in darkness, and the heat lessening up, just. The breeze is there, but only just. The curtains do not billow, they do not move, the air is too oppressive.

* * *

She could write about the men she has known since she was twenty-one, a virgin writing about things she knew nothing about. She could write about the Canadian man and the fiancée he had spilt with a year before and how tied he was to the memory of her. Or she could write about the man who was a virgin at twenty-eight when she met him, the man she subsequently deflowered.

She could write about encounters and gropes, and nowhere dates, a failed attempt at one-night stands. She could write about the intervening years, but she suspects the answers aren’t there either.

It seems too exhausting now to exhume the past, dissect this man, separate this face from that. It's life that happens in between, from the men who define you when you're with them, to the failed dreams.

* * *

Walking into a restaurant, it happens. She sees them there. In a corner are the older lovers: Cleo and Nic. Cleo's just on the cusp of grey hair, the strands blending into her natural red. Cleo leans forward in her seat, smiling, wiping some sugar off the surface of the table. Nic enjoys being catered to, as it were; letting Cleo stir sugar in his coffee. This couple have been together over forty years, yet have never lived together as husband and wife. He won't leave his Greek wife; and long ago, they decided not to marry, not to go against their parents' wishes. How do you reconcile a Jew marrying a man of the Greek Orthodox faith? They see each other in out of the way coffee bars, sleeping together, occasionally now. The bond will never be broken, and there they are: made flesh. The tall, red-haired woman and the overweight man with grey hair. Should she go up to them and say, 'I imagined you, created you out of a story someone told me once. I've written about you, about the night you decided to separate, all those years ago, I've written about other episodes in your life. I feel like I know you, vaguely.'

They'd laugh, look wary, do whatever you do when a madwoman comes up to you, saying impossible stupid things. They'd edge away, be non-committal. Perhaps the man would call the manager or security. Looking at this intrusive woman as though she were wearing old rags, a bag lady, instead of a flowing crushed velvet plum skirt, still wearing the clothes from last night, hastily flung back on this morning.

In another corner, Jude and Dale, up too early this Sunday morning. They were out the whole of last night, at a club. Now they're here,

drinking espressos to jolt them into the day, sharing a croissant – students never have enough money. Silently they eat and drink, both hung-over, with panda eyes as testimony to the night before.

Tyra in love with Tim, Tim in love with Chloe once. Tyra who manipulated her way into Chloe's life. Tyra, who switched sexuality fluidly, yet was mad in the end. What happened to Tim? Did he emigrate, move cities, marry someone else? Did he ever hear what Tyra did, how she seduced Chloe to get to Tim, and then what she did afterwards? Did he want to know, was he beyond caring at that point?

And the man, the man with the dog, walking in the park. About to emigrate. He is there too, sitting just outside the door on the pavement, because the dog is with him, and she's not allowed inside the restaurant. He too drinks a cappuccino. Before him there's a large breakfast, omelette, sausages, rolls. But he's pecking away at the meal, he looks unhappy, disturbed ... Does that mean he didn't go in the end? Did he stay while Deborah and the kids left? Or has she got the time frame wrong? Perhaps this is before he takes a dog for a walk, the main event of the story?

She can't tell, sighs, sits down, and orders her own morning coffee. She can't touch these people, characters of her own imagining, yet real, real as she sits reading a newspaper at her morning coffee. What do they say about her? The failed relationships, the relationships doomed by obsession and lust, by damaged psyches. People who cannot love, no matter how much they may want to. People who never love, until one day, a door is flung wide open, but by then it's too late. Are they all fragments of her: these wounded people looking for hope between the sheets? And on the pages.

* * *

A year later. Another night, and he's there again. She invites him to watch preview copies of Yiddish films from the 1920s and 30s. They see the Madonna of that era, a woman called Molly Picon, looking into a lost world, hearing a language gone now. All she knows of the language is a few fragments, words passed down in conversation: meshugenah, mensch, faribels, putz, and here they come alive again, part of sentences, phrases, another world and culture.

He's broken up with Brenda, and the guilt cuts into them both. He still talks about her, regretting that it happened. He saw her once on an aeroplane coming up from Cape Town. He said hello, she was friendly enough toward him, but she was involved, pointed to the man next to her. He thinks they could have been something. But, he too is running away from love. He doubted her, couldn't fit the pieces of her life's jigsaw together. Where did she get the money to live in a beautiful hill-top flat when she worked only occasionally? Why did she keep flying down to Cape Town? He never knew. He ended it abruptly.

Had he simply been too suspicious, too scared of love, so scared he made excuses come out as reasons?

* * *

And was she too, to blame, the writer? She feels sometimes that she misled him, offering him something briefly, and then taking it away again. Her own need to be loved again, to feel desire, to know lust again. She worries guiltily that he took her sudden interest after so many years as desire again, a rekindling.

He wonders now, saying, 'Do you think we'll ever get back together? We've been apart four years, and yet, neither one of us have met anyone else to be serious about, and people keep seeing us together

at movies and whatever, and they think we're still together!'

She shrugs, 'So what. Confuse them. Who cares?'

She wants to offer it to him again, sex as a sort of present. There's a certain spark in the air, certain boundaries shift and dissolve from time to time, before they harden again. She tries to lead him to her bed, but he won't have it.

'I feel uncomfortable,' he says. 'We shouldn't be doing this, not unless we're going to mean it ...' He hesitates, wants to, yet doesn't want to.

She shrugs again.

Instead they watch old black and white Yiddish movies of another time, another world.

* * *

She wakes up suddenly. It's six in the morning and she has been dreaming about hugging a man. Just hugging, hugging broad shoulders, a man whispering love things to her. She even manages to masturbate. She cannot bring herself to climax, she can, just about, bring herself to the brink, but that's all. Something has broken through, though, this morning after what isn't really a morning after. What remains is a memory of it, of what it can be, this exchange, this thing called sex.

She goes back to the study. It's still early and the light is pale, blue dawn. The cat wakes too and settles again on her blanket on the table. The writer takes up the metaphoric pen and starts again. As the blue light becomes gold, the characters take shape again; once more they assume life. They have sex, procreate, one even has a baby. There's something new stirring, some prescient summoning of the future, as there always has been when she puts thoughts and people to paper.

Finally, a meeting

It happens like this. It's a cold, but sunny day in Trafalgar Square in London, the city I have decided to settle in. The granite-coloured pigeons are fluttering around me, the way they do in all those brochures. The tourists are snapping pictures of themselves feeding the birds and posing beside the statue of Lord Nelson. The red double-decker buses are going around the circle made by the open square, and I am watching it all.

I do not have my camera this day, although I am as much a tourist as the others without permanent London addresses.

And there you are. With your wife of two or three years, you're all over from Canada for a holiday. You see me, I see you, and I am proud. See, I say, I also made it out of South Africa after all that time. I also left, just like you did. Aren't you proud?

Except you aren't proud, you couldn't give a damn, to be honest. I'm long out of your life, and if you haven't quite forgotten me, I was never as important to you as you were to me.

And yet you're not really proud, because you're not there. You're not there on holiday from Canada among the pigeons of Trafalgar Square. This is not the meeting. This is a fantasy I hold while watching another man I am with, who is feeding the birds bread crusts.

So, another meeting then. You're a guide at a game lodge. You open your mouth, and you've got the wrong accent, it's too flat. Where are the round Canadian vowels that flavoured your voice?

Then you're a participant in a training course where I have gone to realise my dreams. Through imagining my goal by visualising it, tasting it, smelling it and touching it, I will achieve my heart's desire. I sit there with other hopefuls: we create dream maps, cutting out pictures of fancy cars and houses, yachts and laptops, and diamond engagement rings. Then we write out what we'd like to achieve and declare our goals to the group. So many want to save the world, end hunger, poverty, reach a billion people. Can they be for real? When I get up I declare my purely selfish aims. I just want love.

Except, once more, at this course, the man is not you. Once more, you have the wrong accent, and you're too short and the shoulders aren't broad enough.

Then it is you, in a restaurant, eating supper with the family you've come back to visit. We're sitting in an ordinary suburban mall in Johannesburg. And this time I want to hide, because I'm with a man, and I don't want you to see me with him. There are all sorts of reasons for that: you'll think I'm involved, although the man and I are just friends; you'll take a look at this other man, and find him wanting, but why should I care about that? You'll want to come over and say hello, and I've put on weight and I don't want you to see me like this.

Except, it's not you. It looks like you, again, but it's not.

And then I realise I am seeing you as you would have looked thirteen years ago. You're no longer young; you were balding back then, and have now probably lost your hair. You would look older, and perhaps you would have put on weight as well, you might have filled out, what with age and being married, and having, say, two kids. You might play with them in the snow on Saturday mornings.

But maybe you no longer go to gym, and still enjoy your beers and so you too have picked up weight. How sad. How accurate. How fanciful. I would like to think that you still have that lean, muscular frame, and the broad shoulders.

So, back to the drawing board.

It's thirteen years later and it didn't work out. You're divorced after nearly a decade of being married. You have two children, and you would have liked more. Although that isn't really viable is it? Financially I mean, and it's expensive enough having two kids anyway, even though your wife (a lawyer?) earns more than you do and so does the lion's share of bringing in the money to pay the bills, you still do have to pay something. But still, living on your own again isn't easy – all those weekends you've got to fill, and you want to start dating again, that takes money and effort.

So that's when I see you, when you're feeling defeated, at your lowest. You've come back to visit your remaining family in Johannesburg, to get away from the situation, see if you can resolve anything with your wife (because, I have just realised, you're not divorced, you're separated, that would make a whole lot more sense). You're hoping distance will clarify matters for both of you. And so, when I see you, you're a little bit broken, vulnerable.

You're eager to have coffee together, then we move onto having a meal, and then I take you back to my place. And we have sex, and rekindle the flame, and cue the MGM drums and cymbals, life is as

it was meant to be before it all came crashing down and we ended before it had begun.

But no, that's not the way it happens either.

In fact, it happens as it never happened in any of my fantasies.

For a start, I'm not in London, or South Africa, I'm in Canada. Why not?

Instead of you coming to me, I'm there. I'm in a small town in Canada, would you believe? I'm married too, hard to imagine that, isn't it? My hair is newly coloured, a deep almost auburn shade, not my natural shade, but I have become more daring as I get on in life. And I am at a writers' conference, and you have come to hear me read my work. (Hang on, husbands don't usually come with their wives to conferences, you say? Well, it's partly a delayed honeymoon as well, and after we are going on to California to see family there. See how easily the loose ends are tied up in real life?)

So there I am. Happy at last. Okay maybe happiness is not a permanent state, but to hell with it, I'm happy. I have been married six months to a man I have known for a year or two, his name is Leo, and I know it's right, it's just an instinctive thing, wouldn't you say?

Leo has a past, as we all do now. He has children, who have grown used to me, and he has an ex-wife. He's edging forty, as you are now. I had a lover before him, a man of twenty-seven, an intense man with ambitions of being a novelist, as you had at that age, but in the end, age and wisdom won out.

So, I am in Canada, at a conference and in a small, dark room I give a reading. I do not see you in the smallish, intimate audience, concentrating as I am. Afterwards, when signing copies of my book I look up and there you are. You have not bought a copy of my book, because, well, that isn't your way. You are smiling, and behind the smile, that same intensity I remember from years ago, the same intensity that my younger lover wore.

‘Hello Paul,’ I say, the simplest expression of our time. I roll your name around my mouth, tasting it. And I am stopped somehow. Leo is at the bar getting drinks, or leaving me to my moments of glory. This is all the time we have now, in a small dark room. I won’t meet you anywhere else.

It is a little as I have imagined, with some small details differing from the fantasy. You have one child, a girl, your wife had a hysterectomy after the difficult birth which almost killed her. So you have one child, not two, not the boy you would have wanted to play games with. And you’re not separated, not really, but your wife travels a lot and you know that something is missing from the relationship. And, just as I suspected all those years ago, you had an affair and then another when you realised the difficulties in your relationship. But you had therapy, and you are still together, and this wife is the woman you are going to spend the rest of your life with.

Such are the details, spilled out over a quick drink at the bar. When I introduce you to Leo, he knows, drifts away, gives us time alone.

That’s why we sit together now. A few quick details spilled out.

And yes, you’re balding, you’ve lost some hair, but that’s all. Still handsome. The only changes are a more pronounced curve around your mouth. Age has deepened your looks, not taken away from them.

We drink and talk quickly, we’re hungry and yet not hungry. This is like eating dessert after a good meal, when you are full, but still you want a taste of sweetness to round off a good evening.

We both know that at this meeting it would have been possible now, if not for the man down the passage who is my husband.

Finally, and yet it’s all too late. Isn’t that what you said those years ago as I apologised in yet another dark and intimate space and I tried to rescue us?

It’s all just a little too late as I sip quickly and appraise you as you

are appraising me. Slimmish, but still not as slim as I would have hoped, hair another colour almost and older, yes older, perhaps I too had been frozen in your mind's eye.

My hotel room's just down the street and we both know what would have happened were it not for all those dead ends stretching back into time, the dead ends that define us.

* * *

Falling in love again, then marrying didn't entirely assuage the past, it would always be there, like dark paint beneath the surface of a cream wall. But time softened the edges, blunted the past, made it count and not count. You could leaf through the past, but the present was now.

* * *

A few months after Canada Leo has been offered a six-month exchange job in Berlin. The architects' firm where he works wants to send him to one of their overseas offices. It's too good an opportunity to pass up. What do I think?

What can I think? How can I tell him no, don't go, don't break up what we have, even if it is just for a few months? And I know he'll resent me forever if I say no. I'll resent myself for standing in his way. What if I had a similar opportunity? I could go with him, Leo tells me. The firm will pay for both our flights, of course. But I won't be able to work in Berlin, not knowing the language, and I don't want to lose my job here. Night after night it goes on, we debate and argue the pros and cons. Leo says I can visit him in a few months, and he can fly back often, and it's settled.

Leo goes to live in Berlin. Or that's how it feels, how it comes out when I tell people, as though it were permanent, instead of just for

six months. I can't help feeling slightly resentful as I wander through the house where we live – Leo's house – it made no sense to move into my tiny townhouse. But it's his house really; he designed it, saw it built, with its high skylights, the double-volume glass in the living room, all the architectural features he wanted to put in a house of his own. I love it, but it's his house, and he's in every room.

* * *

I'm going to be in South Africa for a few weeks, I so enjoyed meeting you again in Canada. Can we meet up for coffee?

There are some emails you wish you had never opened. You wish they had gone straight to trash and that you emptied your trash automatically.

Leo is away working in Berlin at the moment. What dates will you be here?

This time we meet at a crowded shopping centre. We sit outside in the winter sunshine. It has been nearly a year since Canada, over a year since Leo and I were married.

'It's good to see you.' The accent is now so strong. When I knew you it was diluted, the Canadian twang overlaid with the influence of flat South African vowels. But nearly ten years back in Canada have sharpened your accent, as though you had never left that country. 'You look good,' you tell me.

I tell you that you look good too, because it's true. Because you look as beautiful as all those years ago, fourteen years ago, I can't pretend I am not counting the years or losing track. I have been acutely aware of every year passing, of every year without you in my life. Before you and after you were the twin anchors in my life, the beacons that marked now and then. I can't pretend. Not even after meeting Leo.

Once, years ago, I worked with a woman who was going out

with two men. She couldn't decide which one to be with, so she went out with both. They knew about each other, and they weren't happy about the arrangement, but they knew that the only way they were going to have her was by sharing her. It went on for years, she couldn't decide.

You are in South Africa now to help your parents pack up. After years they are also finally moving back to Canada. Your sister and brother and their families are now in Canada too.

'This country is finished!' you say, looking around. We look. The mall is full of shoppers on a late Friday afternoon. People are tucking into plates of food. Waiters bring long tall drinks to the tables. Women wear the latest fashions. We could be anywhere in Europe or North America. There's an ease, a sense of prosperity. From where we sit the country doesn't look finished.

'Is that why Leo's in Berlin,' you ask, 'hoping that it turns into something permanent and the two of you can get the fuck out of here?'

'No,' I answer finally. 'It was just an exchange, a good opportunity for him. He couldn't pass it up, that's all it is.'

You and your wife have now separated after a long difficult year. You're not getting divorced, not just yet; you can't do that to your daughter, Kylie. You're separated for now. Just seeing what the future brings. But you're morose as you say it; the words are light-hearted but not the feeling behind them. I know you too well, even after all these years. I know somehow how you react to things. 'I'm sorry to hear it,' I say. 'That must be hard. Do you see Kylie often?'

'Oh yes, my wife's good that way. Knows how much I love Kylie who comes over to stay in the week, I have her every second weekend. We'd never fight about Kylie.'

What do you fight about, I want to ask, hungry for details, too hungry after all these years, but I don't. I can't give in to this. I can't tell you that I want to know everything.

‘That’s good,’ I say. ‘That’s really good that you too can still be so, I don’t what the word is, friendly maybe, toward each other.’

You nod, look away and I study your profile. The straight nose, the blue eyes, the long deep lines that run from nose to mouth. You lean forward, a slight frown between your eyes. I find myself wanting to lean across and undo a button of your shirt.

Instead I listen, I listen to words that still have the power to wound and hurt, after all these years.

Perhaps because I too am married and no longer a threat, you lean toward me, say, ‘I still love her. I’m still in love with her, I’ll never stop, even if we do get divorced.’

There. You’ve done it. Twisted the knife in again. Yet, this time, you don’t know it.

You still belong to her, I want to say. You’ll never, ever belong to me, not then, not now, not ever.

That night Leo and I talk on Skype. His movements are edgy and jagged, the pixilation is low, he breaks up as he moves. We blow kisses at each other. I do not mention that Paul is in the country, that we met for coffee that turned into lunch and more coffee. Leo does not want to hear such things, and I don’t want to talk about such things.

It was so nice talking to you on Friday. I really enjoyed it. Could we meet again? Are you free for supper at all?

We eat at Montego Bay on Nelson Mandela Square. The lights are pretty on the square which was built to look like an Italian piazza. I love this place, the fakeness doesn’t bother me. But I do feel like I am in Europe here, with the hotel rising above us, and the kids playing on the square, racing in and out of the fountains.

‘So South African,’ says Paul, ‘so, so South African.’

‘I like it!’ I say but I know what you mean; this constant grasping

at Europe, at overseas, aping the other world, instead of embracing what we have here. We eat on a fake Italian square, live in fake Italian homes, ape Provence, Europe, America in our lifestyles. We pretend we're somewhere else even as we proclaim we love Africa, the light, the space, the heat. I saw a play recently in which the performer asked if Italian architects would repay the compliment we pay with our love of all things Tuscan by building a shantytown in Italy. It would be complete with glinting zinc roofs held down by rocks and walls made from recycled street signs. The thought made us all laugh, because, of course, it was never going to happen.

'You just have to say that because you live here!' you say, as dismissive as I remember you being many years ago.

'Do you remember that day we came here, after it had first opened?' I ask. You shake your head.

'There was a flea market in the square, an exhibition of paintings. My mother was here, exhibiting her stuff. We came to see, and then we had lunch. We ate there,' I say pointing to an Italian restaurant across from us.

You look strangely at me. I sense you want to lean over the table and touch me somehow, but you won't. I twist my wedding ring around my finger.

You lean back, 'No, no I don't remember. It was all so long ago.'

'It was long ago and yet not so long ago,' I say. 'Time goes faster the older you get, but I still remember details, things, incidents as though they were yesterday.'

'Rather you than me,' you laugh. 'I like to live in the now, not get bogged down in the past. Too much hassle. You have to move forward.'

'I'm not saying that you shouldn't live for now, just that I remember the past. How can you forget it?'

'Yeah well ...' you shrug. 'Shall we order?'

We order, eat, but as usual when I am nervous I lose my appetite, swirl the prawns around my plate in lemon butter sauce, again and again.

‘Not good?’ you ask, and fork your way into my plate when I say I am not that hungry after all. ‘I’ll have them then.’

The night’s charged. There’s static in the air. I get up to go to the toilet and my hand sparks against the chair. You laugh, ‘It’s always so dry up here in winter. I always forget.’

In the bathroom I apply lipstick, add more brown eyeliner to my eyes. What the hell am I doing here? I take out my cellphone and SMS Leo in Berlin. ‘Out with Jayne, having supper. Prawns! YUM! xxxxx.’

The reply is almost instantaneous: ‘Lucky u! Wrkng 2nite. xxxx.’ At the table you’re finishing the bottle of wine. Something else we could never share. I still can’t drink wine. You hated that, that I couldn’t share a bottle with you. You loved wine, had done a few wine tasting courses, could pontificate on the scent, the nose, and the influence of petals, whatever. It was like another country to me.

You want to order another bottle, but say: ‘The rules are so damn strict here now.’ You laugh. ‘I don’t want to get caught driving drunk and get thrown into jail.’

‘Order another bottle. You can leave your car here overnight, I’ll take you home. Your parents’ house isn’t that far out of my way.’

The deal is sealed.

The detail is in the little things.

You like the house. I’ve yet to meet anyone who’s been here who doesn’t fall in love with it. It’s an architect’s place, made with love at a time Leo thought he’d be alone forever, with separate wings for his kids before his ex-wife took them to LA. It’s a place of light, space, a place to dream, and contemplate. I knew you would like it.

‘Leo designed this all, before he met you?’

‘Yes.’ I am pouring you a glass of wine, a Bloody Mary for me.

As I said, there are various wings to this place. One I converted into my study, it’s light, bright and airy, with a huge table against one wall, and a daybed against another wall. I have always wanted that.

You whistle. ‘What I wouldn’t give to have this kind of set-up!’

I sit down on the daybed. ‘I know. It’s my dream study.’

You have begun another novel, you’ve started so many through the years. ‘This time I am going to finish it I know it, I feel it,’ you said at dinner. ‘This time it’s going to be it. I’m really excited.’

You stand, glass in hand. ‘I work at this little shit hole of a desk in the kitchenette of my rented apartment. Doesn’t matter where you work though, hey, I mean you’re not staring at the walls or the garden, you’re supposed to be staring at the computer screen!’

‘I know. I’ve written in some really grotty places. I once had a place where I couldn’t open the windows or the curtains. It doesn’t always matter. But it’s so nice to have a great space, to look out of the window at a garden, a tree.’

‘I guess,’ you say joining me on the daybed, leaning against the wall.

How the tables have turned, I can’t help thinking. You are reduced to a rented flat, with a kitchenette, to all intents and purposes single again. Now I’m the one with the spouse, the big home, the one who has published, while you’re still battling to finish a novel. It feels so cruelly right, and I can’t help taking pleasure in this, this reversal, seeing you struggling. And yet equally strangely I want to reach out, put you in touch with people, I want you to succeed even as I take pleasure in your not having succeeded.

What happens next is a cliché.

We move together. We’re clumsy, awkward; it’s been so many years. We kiss as we never did back then. I try not to think of Leo, I can’t, he’s not part of this, he’s far away. Would he understand the hunger

I have to know? Probably not. He has never understood why I still carry feelings for you, a man who could not love me back. You, who wanted a lovely wife to be there for him, keeping his dreams alive instead of following her own, a woman who would marry him, be there for him, have his children. I never wanted that, you and I never got beyond talking about it.

When Leo and I met you were still a presence, had never gone away, despite the years. But I couldn't pack you away, even after falling in love again.

The questions still niggled. Why? Why couldn't you love me back? What was wrong with me? I have always had this terrible need to examine my past, could never let it go. Always that need to go back, find out, see if I can make things right again.

What was that saying? Something about the past, and not being able to step in the same river twice? You can't go back. You can't find out why. There's no way of knowing. You just have to go forward, accept what has happened and take what's in front of you.

The sex is awkward, but that doesn't take away from how attracted I am to you. How I still want to run my hands along your chest, how beautiful I still find you, and how disappointing it is to see that we still can't connect this way.

It's the same, different, but the same. I can't compare it to Leo.

There's no love here. You've never loved me, not as you love your wife, and not as you loved the fiancée you had all those years ago when we first met. There's something else here, something I have to grab at, again and again. Something earthy, rotten, smelling like mulch and leaves and autumn days.

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Hamilton Wende author of 'House of War'



Arja Salafranca's publications include two collections of poetry, **A Life Stripped of Illusions** and **The Fire in which we Burn** and an anthology of prose and poetry, **glass jars among trees**, which she edited with Alan Finlay. Her fiction has been widely published in local and international journals and anthologies, and online. She has twice won the **Sanlam Literary Award**. She is a journalist and currently is the lifestyle and arts editor at **The Sunday Independent**. Find her online at www.arjasalafranca.blogspot.com.

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